

# SUBLIMATION ANGELS

## A NOVELLA BY JASON SANFORD

PLUS STORIES BY JEREMIAH TOLBERT / ADRIAN JOYCE  
KATHERINE SPARROW & RACHEL SWIRSKY / CHRIS BUTLER  
ROBERT HOLDSTOCK ON 25 YEARS OF MYTHAGO WOOD

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## STORIES

## FEATURES

04

### SUBLIMATION ANGELS

NOVELLA by JASON SANFORD

illustrated by Paul Drummond

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02

### ANSIBLE LINK

DAVID LANGFORD

News, obituaries

50

### BOOK ZONE

Book reviews by Sandy Auden, Ian Hunter, Paul Graham Raven, Iain Emsley, Ian Sales, John Howard, Vikki Green

### ROBERT HOLDSTOCK

Sandy Auden talks with the author about 25 years of *Mythago Wood*

58

### MUTANT POPCORN

NICK LOWE

Film reviews including *The Time Traveler's Wife*, *Moon*, *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*, *Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen*, *GI Joe: The Rise of Cobra*, *G-Force*, *Ice Age 3: Dawn of the Dinosaurs*, *Land of the Lost*, *Aliens in the Attic*

36

### THE GODFALL'S CHEMSONG

JEREMIAH TOLBERT

illustrated by Martin Bland

spyroteknik.com



62

### LASER FODDER

TONY LEE

DVD/Blu-ray reviews including *Stargate Atlantis Season Five*, *Outlander*, *Dollhouse Season One*, *Dragonball Evolution*, *Push*, *Man in the Moon*, *Watchmen Director's Cut*, *Mega Shark vs Giant Octopus*

42

### THE FESTIVAL OF TETHSELEM

CHRIS BUTLER

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PAGE 50: ROBERT HOLDSTOCK  
25 years of *Mythago Wood*



## Editorial

## Ansible Link David Langford



**Chris Beckett won the 2009 Edge Hill Short Story Prize** for his collection *The Turing Press* (Elastic Press), beating amongst others Booker winner Anne Enright and Whitbread winner Ali Smith. At a ceremony held by Edge Hill University on Saturday 4th July, at the Bluecoat centre in Liverpool (*Interzone*'s Roy Gray was in attendance – he took the photograph), Chris was presented with the £5,000 prize and a specially commissioned painting by Liverpool artist Pete Clarke. He was then also awarded the £1,000 Readers' Prize, voted for by local reading groups and MA Creative Writing students.

This year's judges were James Walton, journalist and chair of BBC Radio 4's *The Write Stuff*, author and 2008 winner Claire Keegan, and Mark Flinn, Pro-Vice Chancellor of Edge Hill University. James Walton commented: "I suspect Chris Beckett winning the Edge Hill Prize will be seen as a surprise in the world of books. In fact, though, it was also a bit of a surprise to the judges, none of whom knew they were science fiction fans beforehand. Yet, once the judging process started, it soon became clear that *The Turing Test* was the book that we'd all been impressed by, and enjoyed, the most – and one by one we admitted it."

Many congratulations to Chris, and also to publisher Andrew Hook for this fantastic achievement. If you don't have a copy of *The Turing Test*, it's still available from elasticpress.com.

Most of the stories in the collection were originally published in *Interzone*, and a new one will appear here soon.



## Langford delivers column to our purpose-built office complex

**Hugo Awards.** Novel: Neil Gaiman, *The Graveyard Book*. Novella: Nancy Kress, 'The Erdmann Nexus' (*Asimov's* 10/08). Novelette: Elizabeth Bear, 'Shoggoths in Bloom' (*Asimov's* 3/08). Short: Ted Chiang, 'Exhalation' (*Eclipse Two*). Related Book: John Scalzi, *Your Hate Mail Will Be Graded*. Graphic Story: Kaja & Phil Foglio, *Girl Genius, Volume 8*. Dramatic, Long: WALL-E. Dramatic, Short: *Doctor Horrible's Sing-Along Blog*. Editor, Short: Ellen Datlow. Editor, Long: David G. Hartwell. Professional Artist: Donato Giancola. Semiprozine: *Weird Tales*. Fanzine: *Electric Velocipede*. Fan Writer: Cheryl Morgan. Fan Artist: Frank Wu. Campbell Award (new writer): David Anthony Durham. The Semiprozine category sparked a campaign against its scheduled abolition (whose ratification was defeated at the Worldcon business meeting, so the award continues). This buzz may be why the perennial winner *Locus* was toppled by *Weird Tales*. Many who feel that fanzines should be avowedly amateur publications were unhappy that a fiction magazine that pays its contributors (ie a semiprozine) campaigned for and won the Fanzine Hugo.

**As Others See Us.** Alastair Reynolds's £1m Gollancz deal inspired highly

original literary badinage from the *Bookseller's* 'Agent Provocateur', Miss Daisy Frost: 'Twitterers also tell me that the Al Reynolds mega book deal has been misreported too – that doesn't surprise me as no one would give a science fiction writer a million pounds for 10 books. I mean how many anoraks does a geek need? My spy tells me that it was actually an advance of £10 for a million books and not vice versa.' Tut, tut.

**Justine Larbalestier** got a traditional whitewash treatment from Bloomsbury US, with her novel's short-haired black protagonist of *Liar* shown on advance jacket art as long-tressed and white. Er, said Bloomsbury, the character's a compulsive liar, might be lying about her appearance, and (presumably) even deceived the author... (PW) A darker though still long-haired girl was substituted.

**Magazine Scene.** *Jim Baen's Universe*, after four years of publication, is to fold with the April 2010 issue. • In July, *Interzone* became the longest-running UK sf magazine by number of issues, with 223 to *New Worlds*' 222. Will Michael Moorcock ('We Try Harder') be stirred to revive *NW* again?

**OK Reading Copy.** Eleven of the late Fred

Saberhagen's novels are excitably described by Fine Edition Books of Greenhithe as each having 'a spine as spotless and stiff as as a viagra induced rampage in a combative warthog during mating season' (AbeBooks)

**More Awards.** *Campbell Memorial:* Cory Doctorow, *Little Brother*, and Ian R. MacLeod, *Song of Time* (tie).

*David Gemmell Legend* (fantasy): Andrzej Sapkowski, *Blood of Elves*.

*Edge Hill Prize* for story collection: Chris Beckett, *The Turing Test* (mostly from *Interzone*). Since the £5,000 prize has no genre restrictions and a Booker winner and nominees were shortlisted, this surprised even the judges, 'none of whom knew they were science fiction fans beforehand.'

*Mythopoetic* (fantasy). Adult Literature: Carol Berg, *Flesh and Spirit* and *Breath and Bone*. Children's: Kristin Cashore, *Graceling*.

*Prometheus* (libertarian): Cory Doctorow, *Little Brother*.

*Sidewise* (alternate history). Long: Chris Roberson, *The Dragon's Nine Sons*. Short: Mary Rosenblum 'Sacrifice' (*Sideways in Crime*).

**No Frills.** TV sf is inspirational, says Tony Alleyne of 24th Century Interior Design: 'Science fiction interiors explore unconventional but imaginative environments [...] The *Star Trek* variety is minimal but soft, with the greys, whites, pastels, and aluminium suggestive of a luxury liner. It's an ideal living space. There's no clutter. There are no doilies in space.' (*Financial Times*)

**Philip Pullman**, Quentin Blake and other children's authors are incensed by the UK Home Office's 'guilty until proven innocent' policy which requires them to pay £64 to be vetted and cleared of paedophilia before they can speak to, say, 50 children in the presence of teachers. Because, you know, in such inflamed surroundings authors notoriously run amok. Rather than submit to a policy so 'corrosive and poisonous to every kind of healthy social interaction', Pullman & Co. will no longer visit schools.

**Downhill Ever Since.** '[T]he landing of Apollo 11 was the end of the glory days of sci-fi' (Conceptualfiction.com, July)

**Doctors at Large.** Honorary doctorates

went to J.G. Ballard (posthumous, Royal Holloway University of London), Iain Banks (Middlesex), Philip Pullman (Oxford) and Bryan Talbot (Sunderland). The latter was impelled to buy a sonic screwdriver.

**J.K. Rowling** allegedly plagiarized an obscure 1987 children's book called *Willy the Wizard* in *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*. Its author Adrian Jacobs died in 1997; his estate trustee Paul Allen announced a lawsuit against Bloomsbury. Gigantic borrowings from Jacobs's 36-page text are said to include 'a wizard contest' and 'the idea of wizards traveling on trains'. (Reuters) I'm sure no one had ever imagined a wizard contest before, but did

Jacobs nick the train concept from Susan Cooper's *Silver on the Tree* (1977)?

**Thog's Masterclass.** *Loss of Face Dept.* 'I watched him turn from pale to ashen in about two seconds flat; his face tried to drain away but never got past his Adam's apple, which bobbed convulsively as he did his best to swallow it.' (Laurence Payne, *Knight Fall*, 1987) • *Dept of Pointed Looks*. 'Her eyes were leveled missile batteries, untouched by any human emotion.' (David Weber, *Field of Dishonor*, 1994) • *Buxom Dept.* 'There was a whole family of planets ... and I picked out one that I named Beth, after my girl. She was about five thousand miles in diameter...' ('Clive Trent', *Human Pyramid*, 1941)

DAVID LANGFORD'S NEW BOOK *STARCOMBING* IS OUT NOW – AND REVIEWED ON PAGE 54

R • I • P

**Charles N. Brown** (1937–2009), co-founder and long-time publisher and editor of the leading genre news magazine *Locus* (which has won 29 Hugo awards) died on 12 July aged 72. He had long been a central figure of the sf fan community; in person, his grumpily sardonic conversation was always fun.

**Robert A. Collins** (1929–2009), US sf scholar who edited various notable critical journals and anthologies and founded the International Conference for the Fantastic in the Arts, died on 27 June.

**Barry England** (1932–2009), UK playwright and author of *Figures in a Landscape* (1968) plus the post-holocaust sf novel *No Man's Land* (1997), died on 21 May aged 77.

**H(arriet) B. Gilmour** (1939–2009), US publisher (Bantam, Scholastic) and author whose genre work for children the twice-filmed T\*Witches fantasy series (2001–2004), died on 21 June aged 69.

**Phyllis Gotlieb** (1926–2009), Canadian poet and author who began publishing sf in 1959 – with her novel debut being *Sunburst* (1964) – died on 14 July; she was 83. In 1982 she received Canada's Aurora Award for sf

life achievement.

**John A. Keel** (1930–2009), UFO/paranormal author whose best-known work *The Mothman Prophecies* (1975, aka *Visitors from Space*) inspired the 2002 sf/horror film of the same title, died on 3 July; he was 79.

**Arthur O. Lewis Jr** (1920–2009), US scholar of utopian sf whose books included *American Utopias: Selected Short Fiction* (1971), died on 18 July aged 88.

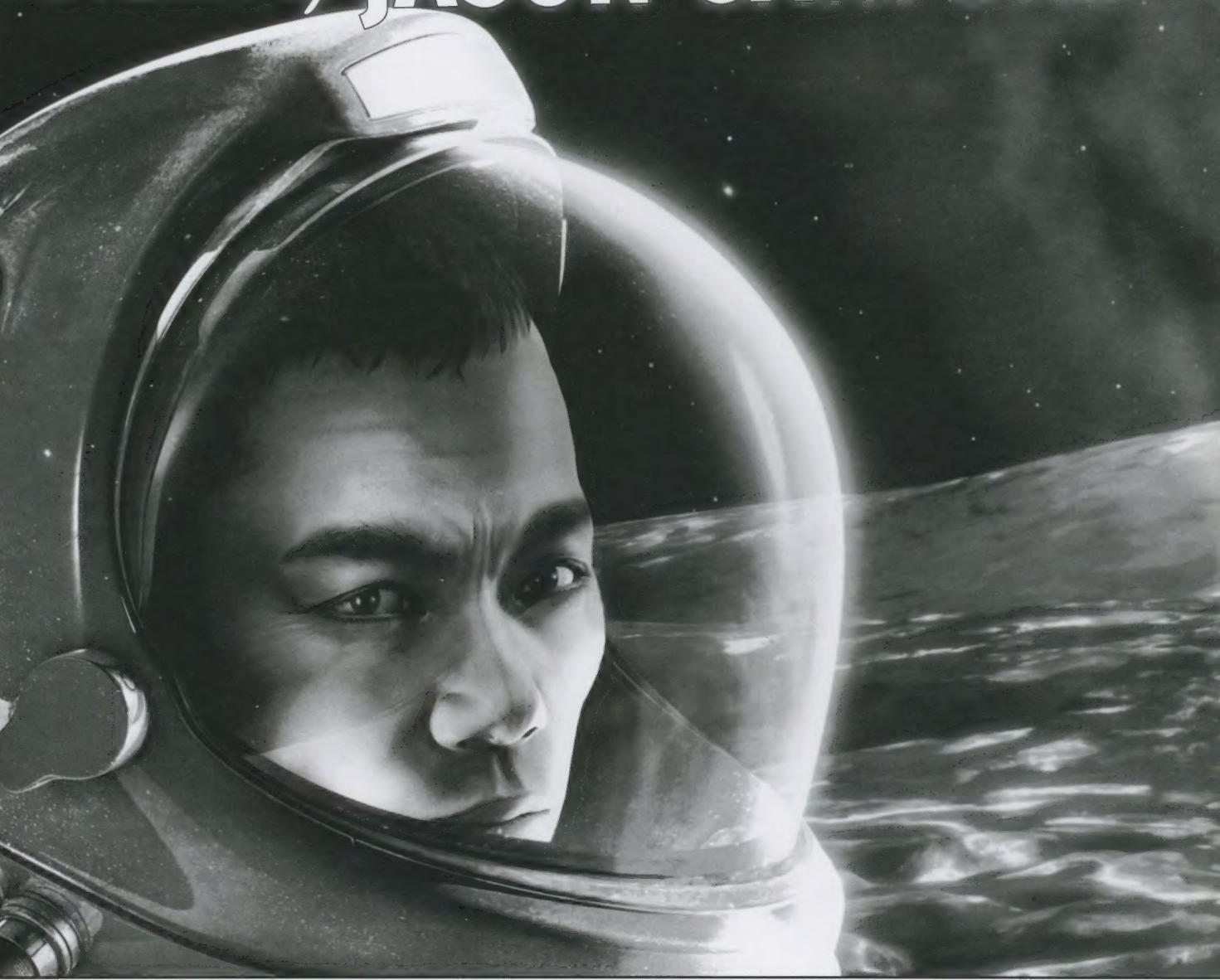
**Stephen Robinett** (1941–2004), whose 1969 *Analog* debut story and other early work was published as by Tak Hallus, reportedly died on 16 February 2004. His sf novels are *Stargate* (1976) and *The Man Responsible* (1978).

**John Ryan** (1921–2009), UK cartoonist who created Captain Pugwash and the inept 'special agent' Harris Tweed (some of whose exploits were sf) for the 1950s *Eagle* comic, died on 22 July; he was 88.

**Paul O. Williams** (1935–2009), US author, academic and haiku poet most noted in sf for the seven-book Pelbar Cycle (1981–1985), died on 2 June. He won the Campbell Award for best new sf writer in 1983.

# SUBLIMATION ANGELS

*a novella by* JASON SANFORD



**A**LNA AND I STOOD ON EUR'S MIRRORED-IN SURFACE, TAKING a breather in our sweat-stenched slush suits. The hole we'd dug through the frigid reflective ash smoked a haze of oxygen toward the blue and orange maw of the Crab Nebula, which hung in the sky near our planet's distant mother star. Across the vacuum black, countless Aurals shifted the star field into a mnemonic ROY G. BIV of circles and exclamations. As I watched the alien balls of energy fly by, I remembered something my brother said shortly before he died. How our skies – and our whole existence – were merely the backdrop on which the Aurals played their indecipherable games.

While I rested, sore from digging in my ill-fitting suit, I watched a yellow Aural. The illuminated ball shot toward the horizon, its parallel reflection flashing across the planet's mirror surface.

The yellow Aural and its reflection flew closer and closer until they merged at the horizon, an illogical sight which shoved my eyes to vertigo and my stomach toward vomit – a fatal thing to do in a sealed pressure suit.

To calm my stomach, I cranked my suit's tick-tock ventilator, blowing a burst of scrubbed-clean air across my face. I then scraped away more of the superinsulating ash with my ice cleaver, revealing the frozen light-blue oxygen below. Soon an even larger cloud of air bubbled around us.

Alna grabbed my shoulder. "Moms...mad...this," she shouted, her shout carrying as weak whispers because of our touch. I gave a thumbs up. Moms were always mad when anyone messed with the Aurals' precious mirror ash, which kept the oxygen and the rest of the frozen atmosphere from returning to gas as Eur's

*Dedicated to Fritz Leiber  
and his inspiring pair of air*



eccentric orbit took us back toward the planet's mother star.

Alna chunked her ice cleaver aside and kneeled reverently. When I didn't join her in prayer, she grabbed my suit's ventilator crank and pulled me to my knees. Like many low kids, she believed clouds of air like this were sublimation angels, or the spirits of those denied rebirth. By releasing enough air into the world, you freed the soul of anyone you loved. In this case, the angel and prayers were for Omare, Alna's husband and my twin brother.

"Pump me up, Chicka," Alna shouted/whispered when she finished praying. I detached the backup hose from her suit and attached it to our spare oxymix canister, then cranked her pressure to four times normal. After checking that the partial pressure of the nitrogen in her suit was enough to hit narcosis – the needle dial showed 3 bar – I ran my own suit through the

same procedure, then lay back in the ash and stared at the sky.

Above us, a red and purple Aural lit multiple tracers as it blossomed into a flower of light, creating the rainbow petals of six brand new Aurals. Alna rapped on my helmet and grinned. "I feel Omare," she said as tears dotted her facemask.

I laughed. This was silly. My dead brother wasn't bubbling into the sky. Instead, frozen air naturally sublimated when the light from Eur's mother star hit it. But before I could say anything, movement from the mirror landscape snagged my eye. To my surprise there stood Omare, buck naked and waving at me.

My twin looked impossibly thin, his body and arms reaching for the horizon as he smiled. The nitrogen narcosis caused me to imagine – for the briefest of moments – that I was the one standing on the surface. That my body waved at me. Then I remembered the moms grinding Omare's body to kibble and dumping him in the decay pit. I moaned.

As if to distract me from such ugly memories, Omare pointed to a passing Aural. Even though enough rationality survived my narcosis to know my dead brother couldn't be standing naked on a world so cold its atmosphere long ago froze and fell from the sky, I smiled.

Alna touched her helmet against my helmet and we heard each other giggle. For the first time since being born on this cursed world, I felt like I truly, truly belonged.

I am stupid. Omare was smart. Of the expedition's two thousand people, he was chosen. I was not. Everyone knows this. The smart boy and his dumb brother. The special one – and the one who fears the Aurals.

But it shouldn't have been so. I was born a mom. Born to know things. And I do. I know we aren't meant to live on this frozen world. I know the tech our ancestors created for us six hundred years ago – all the suits and cleavers and tick-tock mechanisms which keep us alive – are wearing down. I know the Aurals are not our friends. I know all this, but because I wasn't chosen like Omare, no one listens.

Omare and I were born in the highest level of the cave in as much heat and good air as our expedition could give. While low kids raised their children in the lower cave's cold, as children Omare and I never knew this deprivation. We only knew that our mother and father loved us, and if we climbed down the cave's spiral tunnels we had to remember to wear clumsy pails of frozen oxymix around our neck. The insulated pails contained a tiny tick-tock heater, and you cranked them every few minutes to smoke out the extra air needed to live.

When we were ten, our parents led us to the surface for our ceremonial joining with the expedition. They sealed Omare and me in a tuber, a clear bubble used for emergency pressure drops. Once outside the airlock, I poked the bubble over and over, amazed that something so flimsy could keep our air and warmth inside. We walked awkwardly across the frozen surface to where a handful of other bubbles waited, each holding two kids from our age class.

Omare, being Omare at even such a young age, whispered that this bubble was like all the expedition's dead technology – the slush suits, the cave, our rebreathers and heat exchangers – built for us long ago and still functioning with only minimal repairs. "This tech might as well be magic," he said, "because we

sure can't create it anymore."

I suppose he would have gone on like that, a ten-year-old babbling of things his brother didn't care about. But right then the burning ball of light of an Aural flashed across the sky. No larger than the tuber Omare and I stood in, the indigo Aural dipped for a moment before flying back toward the Crab Nebula, where it exploded into several smaller Aurals, each spinning spirals across the star-burned blackness.

Omare stared in amazement at the disappearing aliens. Heck, we all stared. But for Omare, it wasn't enough to simply see a beautiful sight. No, he had to understand it. "They're playing," he said. "There's no logical reason for such displays unless they're playing with us."

I shrugged, having no way to know. But mother and father, touching our bubble with their slush suits, heard Omare's comment. Mother leaned over the tuber until her facemask pushed the clear bubble in. "Be quiet," she ordered nervously, her voice tinny to what I now know was my first experience at suit to suit talking. "And keep quiet when Big Mom starts the ceremony."

Omare and I nodded, and I was suddenly aware that only the thinnest of barriers separated us from a quick and cold death.

Soon the bubbles were pushed together so the clear surfaces touched and we heard the other kids still laughing in amazement at the Aurals. However, one age mate was quiet and merely glared at Omare. His name was Gunetar. He was a big, nasty boy my brother had fought with numerous times. Gunetar loved picking on low kids, something Omare refused to tolerate.

"Chicka," Gunetar whispered. "She's going to pop you."

"Who is?" I asked.

"Big Mom. She makes an example out of two kids at every ceremony. Orders the enforcers to cut open their bubble. Slice. Bang. You're dead."

My face paled and Gunetar laughed. Omare started to tell Gunetar to decay off, but right then Big Mom walked out of the airlock in her black space suit. Big Mom was tens of thousand of years old – with over six hundred of that spent on this planet – and her word was life or decay for everyone in the expedition. Before coming to this world, Big Mom had been an artificial intelligence, one of the numerous AIs who oversaw humanity's affairs. But in order to enter the Aurals' system, she gave up that power and encased herself in a flimsy human body.

Beside Big Mom stood three large enforcers in black suits, each holding a combat cleaver. One of the enforcers lowered her cleaver until it hovered a handspan above the bubble holding Omare and me. Behind us, Gunetar made a soft popping sound with his mouth. He snickered when I grabbed Omare's hand.

Big Mom stepped forward and placed her suited hands on the tubers so everyone heard her. "You are privileged to be here," she whispered in her majestic, harmonizing voice, which hinted so perfectly at her AI origins. "This is the six hundredth and third year of our amazing voyage. You already know why we're on this planet. To learn about the Aurals. To contact them. So far, we have failed. Perhaps you will succeed where we have not."

As Big Mom fell back into the history we'd all studied, I yawned. We all knew the Aurals were the only intelligent space-faring species discovered so far by humanity. We also knew that each attempt by humanity and our AIs to either contact the Aurals, or expand into the systems they claimed, resulted in the

destruction of our ships and probes.

Noticing my eyes glazing over, one of the enforcers kicked our bubble. I sat up straight, hoping Big Mom hadn't noticed.

"The Aurals hate humanity's high technology," Big Mom said. "That's why they attack us. But perhaps they are also receptive to coexistence. So here we are, on this frozen planet, presenting ourselves to the Aurals in simple, unadorned peace. No technology but the most basic. No way to leave until this planet's eccentric orbit takes us back out of Aural space."

"Do they really want us here?" Omare asked. "The Aurals, I mean."

The silence of vacuum fell into Omare's question, although I heard Gunetar snicker softly. Big Mom stared down at Omare, and one of the enforcers raised his cleaver as if to slice open our tuber. Big Mom waved for him to stop.

"An innocent's question," Big Mom said, placing her hands on our bubble alone. "The short answer is yes. This is the Aural home world. Long before humanity reached into space, the Aurals pushed their home world out of its normal orbit, causing Eur to travel to the very edge of this star's gravitational field and leave Aural space for a brief period every five hundred years. A single message, one of the few we've ever received from the Aurals, humbly offered us their home as a means to travel into their realm and meet them as equals."

I thought of the power of the Aurals. Able to throw their home planet into a new orbit as if a toy. How they coated Eur with mirror ash once the atmosphere froze, preserving the world as easily as a ball of food thrown onto ice. Even though this didn't seem like a meeting of equals to me, I thanked Big Mom for telling us what we already knew. But Omare wasn't satisfied. He wanted to know why we hadn't left Aural space, since Eur's orbit was five hundred years long and we'd been here for more than six hundred years. As his mouth opened to spout that deadly question, I saw the guards shift their tuber-cutting cleavers.

I quickly kicked Omare. "Please excuse my brother," I said to Big Mom. "He's simply excited about the Aurals."

Omare glared at me as he rubbed his sore shin, then nodded agreement.

With no more intruding questions, Big Mom ordered our bubbles spread across the mirror ash to see if the Aurals would communicate with us. This had been attempted with every person born in our expedition for six hundred years, and in all that time none of the Aurals had taken the least interest in us. But that didn't stop the moms from trying again and again to gain the Aurals' attention.

So much for that meeting of equals.

For a moment nothing happened. A few random Aurals arched through the sky. I glanced down at the mirrored surface to watch their reflections, causing my stomach to almost explode from vertigo.

Gagging, I looked up in time to see a pink Aural spin out of the sky. It fell scary fast, causing several startled enforcers to jump back. The ball of energy shot around the moms and veered right at our tuber, where it stopped.

As I looked into the pure light of an Aural, the vertigo of a moment before returned, as if instead of an Aural I watched my own reflection dancing a jig while my body remained perfectly still. The Aural hovered silently for a moment, then bumped our

tuber gently, even though the Aural didn't appear to be solid. Omare – again, merely being Omare – reached out his hand and touched the thin bubble separating us from the alien.

But where Omare wanted to touch the Aural, I wanted to get away. I could only think of the power of this damn thing. How they threw their home world across space. How they destroyed any high tech which dared approach their system. But if the Aural noticed me clawing in panic against the back of the tuber, it didn't respond. It merely nuzzled against the bubble separating it from Omare's hand, rang like a ceramic chime, then spun silently back into the sky.

And so Omare became the Aurals' chosen one.

Everyone celebrated that day. Moms. Low kids. Middle workers. Even Big Mom couldn't wipe the smile from her face. Our first true contact with the Aurals.

Or I should say, everyone celebrated but me. Back in our tiny bub, I cried in my mother's lap. Told her our mission was stupid stupid stupid. That we didn't belong on this world. That the Aurals were evil.

"You should be happy for your brother," she said as she hugged me. "This means a lot. Not only to him, but to all of us."

I wanted to scream, but instead I wiped my tears and said I understood. I then waited until Omare came back home and punched him in the stomach.

Of course, the moms caught Alna and me.

After only fifteen minutes of nitrogen narcosis, our suit's tick-tock regulator valves clicked on and began venting the excess pressure, edging the hallucinations away as we slowly decompressed. I opened my eyes to see a massive cloud of oxygen boiling into the sky. Through the haze I saw Alna hacking at the mirror ash with the cleaver, making the hole bigger – far bigger – than it should be.

I grabbed the cleaver from her and began to scrape mirror ash back over the oxygen. But it was too late. The moms had seen us. They marched across the mirror ash, small at first, their suits' dark lines wavering between original sky and reflected sky, stick-figure mirages growing larger and larger the closer they came. I thought about running, but they were between us and the cave's airlocks. Neither Alna nor I had enough air to stay out much longer.

When the moms hiked close enough to see their helmeted faces, I saw they were lead by Gunetar, now Big Mom's main enforcer.

"You're kidding me," he said, grabbing my facemask with both his suited hands, so he could both hold me and force his words to my ears. He was red-faced mad, sucking oxymix at a terrible rate. "Chicka, you're as crazy as your brother."

Alna blew a mugging kiss at Gunetar, turning his face even redder. She obviously didn't give a suit's tear about Gunetar catching us. With Omare decayed, she didn't want to be reborn.

Before Gunetar boot stepped us back to the cave, he ordered us to rake the insulating ash back over the smoking hole. As I covered the last of the oxygen, a blue Aural the size of my head flittered across the mirror landscape. The ball of energy circled us twice only a meter above the ash. Like Omare had done as a child, I reached out to touch it as the clear tones of bells filled my head. The Aural hovered near my glove for a moment before the

tiny ball arched back to the skies like we hadn't mattered at all.

Three years after Omare became the Aurals' chosen one, our father died in a cave-in while overseeing the mining of a new supply tunnel. Our planet suffered from constant seismic shocks. While the cave was built to survive tremors, the supply tunnels – cut as they were through the different layers of the planet's frozen atmosphere – frequently collapsed. The risk of cave-ins was why our father had asked Big Mom several times for a new job. But one did what Big Mom told you to do, even unto death.

Mother screamed in rage when she learned of the collapse, and ordered the enforcers to dig through the rubble to reach him. "He might still be alive," she said. But Big Mom stopped them.

"He's safer under the ice," Big Mom said. "When Eur leaves Aural space, we'll recover his frozen body and reborn him with tech you can scarcely imagine. He'll wake, and learn how humans are truly supposed to live."

"Don't you understand?" our mother yelled. "We're not leaving Aural space. We never will. If this planet was going to leave, it would have done so a hundred years ago."

A cold-shock hush fell across the moms. Everyone knew we should have long since left Aural space and been rescued by humanity. But that was a fact no one ever spoke in public, and especially not to Big Mom.

Big Mom gestured to an enforcer, who raised a cleaver to our mother's neck. "Speak of this again," Big Mom said, "and your children will be orphans." She spoke so dispassionately I had no trouble believing that she'd once been an AI.

Our mother nodded, and silently led Omare and me back to the safety of our little bub.

A month later, Omare and I woke to find ourselves alone in our bub. By the time we dressed, Gunetar stood outside our door. He wore the grey apprentice uniform of a newly sworn enforcer and grinned wickedly.

"Your mother killed herself," he said. "Jumped out an airlock without a suit. Guess she couldn't go on without your father."

I screamed at Gunetar and tried to hit him, but Omare held me back. "Liars," I yelled at Gunetar. "You, the Aurals, Big Mom. All of you."

Omare told me to shut up before he thanked Gunetar for the news. Gunetar looked surprised at Omare's icy reaction to our mother's death, then nodded his head like a pompous fool and walked away.

Once we were alone, I told Omare that Big Mom killed our mother. "Of course she did," Omare said in that calm, logical tone I found so irritating. "But if you talk of this, we'll suffer the same fate. Our mother wouldn't want that."

A few hours later, Omare and I watched the enforcers grind up our mother's stiff body and throw the pieces into the decay pit, where her flesh bubbled among the yellow and green liquids. Big Mom watched impassively, looking older than I remembered and leaning on her main enforcer for support. When Big Mom finally spoke to the gathered crowd, she said she understood the anguish which drove our mother to both question our mission and kill herself. However, she added, some things could not be allowed. "Remember," she said. "Rebirth is only offered to the dutiful."

Omare held my hand. "Don't let the moms see your anger," he whispered. "Anger will mark you as dangerous."

As I shoved the tears back down my eyes, I swore to keep it hidden.

Naturally Omare and I were punished for our mother's deeds. We were kicked out of our bub and given a new one near the bottom of the cave, down where the low kids lived. While our old bubble house had been big enough to sleep ten people side by side, our new bub – simply a round pocket carved into the rock, and coated with thermal blankets – barely let you stretch out without touching both walls.

Big Mom also demoted me to middle worker, forcing me to learn the trade of pressure suit repair. Omare, though, was given probation, and allowed to continue his higher studies. After all, he was the chosen one, and the chosen one couldn't repair suits for the rest of his life.

One night I couldn't sleep because of leg cramps from long hours of test walking slush suits. I opened my glow tube and glanced through Omare's school books. Angry that I couldn't study and learn like he did, I wrote four questions on the back page of his physics book – the asking of any of which was a death sentence.

My questions were simple:

*Why did the Aurals throw their home world into a new orbit and preserve it under mirror ash, thousands of years before humanity reached space?*

*Do the Aurals hate humanity's high tech, or do they hate us?*

*Why hasn't this planet's orbit taken us back out of Aural space?*

*If Big Mom is now human, why is she still alive after 600 years?*

For a moment I considered letting Omare take the book to school, and imagined his professors' reaction when they saw the questions their beloved chosen one dared to contemplate. But in the end I couldn't risk Omare's life. I woke my brother and showed him what I'd done. He read the questions slowly, nodded solemnly, then tore the page out of the book.

"You truly are my twin," he whispered. "I've pondered the same questions. But you forgot the most important one."

"Which is?"

"What are you going to do about this?"

Everyone else in the expedition loved it when the chosen one was cryptic and sage-like. Me, I hit him and fell asleep angry.

Big Mom was still, well, Big Mom.

Gunetar dragged Alna and I to our expedition's largest bubble house, where Big Mom sat surrounded by dozens of thermal blankets. Since I'd been kicked down to middle worker, I'd rarely been allowed up where the heat and air were sweet and you could walk around in only a thin insulated jumpsuit. Even though being here meant we were in deep trouble, Alna smiled, enjoying the warmth and fresh air. I glanced out the window and saw the spiral tunnels leading to the lower cave, where the air turned cold and carbon dioxide pockets waited to trap anyone not wearing extra air.

Big Mom muttered my name, and I turned back to her. She listened as Gunetar gave her a one-sided view of catching Alna and me doing narcosis on the ice. Big Mom had aged badly in the decade since she'd killed my mother. Her body looked frail and weak, and she shivered despite several warmth blankets wrapped around her shoulders. However, you could still see the

two purple lines from her eyes to her cheek bones signifying that she'd once been an AI. During Omare's studies of human history, he'd often told me stories about humanity's artificial overseers. I tried to imagine the power Big Mom once controlled, then realized she still controlled enough power to kill me.

When Gunetar finished talking, Big Mom glared at me. "Chicka, it saddens me to see you under such circumstances," she said softly, like oxygen sublimating into near vacuum. "How is your brother?"

"He died several months ago."

"Oh yes, I forgot," she said, a look of irritation running her face as if she hated dealing with the weakness of her now-human memory. "He was such an amazing child. Shame he went so strange."

I nodded, not wanting to say anything to land Alna and me in even more trouble.

"I need to know what you were thinking," Big Mom said. "Why risk your lives by doing narcosis on the surface?"

For once Alna kept her damn mouth shut and merely glanced at me, silently urging me to do the talking. We both knew enough human history to feel the threat behind Big Mom's words. Before taking this voyage, Big Mom – or any AI – could have ripped the very thoughts and emotions from our minds, using the tech which saturated human existence beyond the Aural system. But while I may not live damn near forever like Big Mom, and while I can't control technologies beyond imagining on this iceball world, here my thoughts are my own. Despite her years living as a human, Big Mom still didn't get this.

"We wanted to see if the Aurals might respond to a different level of consciousness," I said cautiously. Big Mom stared, trying to decide the truth to my words. Gunetar, however, rolled his eyes. He obviously didn't believe me. He moved his massive mouth toward Big Mom's ear like he was about to swallow the shrunken cartilage and skin there, but Big Mom waved him silent.

"Did you feel anything, Chicka?" she asked. "Did they try to reach you?"

"No. But right when Gunetar found us, a small Aural circled us several times. Maybe if he hadn't been there..."

"Is this why so many low kids do nitrogen narcosis?"

"Yes," I lied. "They understand the mission, but they also want to try new ways of reaching the Aurals."

Big Mom nodded in excitement. But just as I thought she might fall for my lies, a gentle tickling ran the back of my scalp. Big Mom's eyes narrowed to pin-sticks of anger. "You think it's funny to lie to me," she whispered. "I should decay you."

I tried to mutter an explanation, but Alna interrupted me. "Go ahead and decay us," Alna said. "At least we'll be with Omare."

Gunetar's wide face spit a wicked cut of a smile. "I'm so sorry for what happened to Omare," he said. "He could have gone places – even with such a poor choice in a mate."

That comment pushed Alna over the edge. "You son bitch," she screamed in low kid talk as she leapt at Gunetar. "You know. You decay Omare."

Gunetar easily slammed Alna to the floor. Because Big Mom was watching, he didn't do the different pains and hurts he knew, but he was so much stronger than Alna he didn't need tricks. I reached for Alna, maybe to tell her to calm down, maybe to get Gunetar not to hurt her, and suddenly I was thrown to the floor.

The mom guarding the door held me down, pressing her knee into my back and twisting my right arm behind me.

I glanced at Alna, who cried like she had when Omare died. Gunetar told Big Mom we'd always been trouble. Big Mom nodded, still angry at my lie. But she softened as she stared at me, and I knew she was seeing Omare's face in place of my own. Maybe she regretted all she'd done to push my brother to his death.

"Don't kill them," she said, her voice exhausted as if she'd walked in a slush suit emptied of oxygen. "Simply work them in the decay pit."

The decay pit lay hundreds of meters below in the very lowest reaches of the cave. Heated by the expedition's heat exchangers – which reached to the planet's core and used natural convection to cycle cold down and heat up – the pit was warm enough that people actually sweated when they worked. Omare once told me that if the big moms had wanted to, they could have built our expedition with enough heat exchangers so the entire cave would be as warm as the pit.

"Why didn't they?" I asked naively.

"Because if everyone had good heat and air, we wouldn't need Big Mom to control us."

I thought of this as the enforcers dragged us to the decay pit shores. For a moment I feared Gunetar would defy Big Mom and grind us up, dumping our kibble into the pit like he'd done my brother. Instead, Gunetar held a half-eaten fruit ball before my face, then tossed it into the liquid decay.

"In case Omare's hungry," he said.

Alna's eyes flashed with rage, but I held her back so she wouldn't get us in even more trouble. "You are such a wimp," she screamed at me.

Gunetar laughed as he left us to our prison.

And so began my life as a low kid.

Working the decay pit was the worst job in the expedition. The size of a thousand bub houses, the pit contained a lake of bacteria and modified fungi which digested everything thrown in. Our job consisted of rowing a boat back and forth across the pit so our paddles mixed the ferment and liquids. We'd then strain the muck from the bottom with a net and drag it to shore, where we packed the slime around the roots of the pale green vegetables and grains, their thin, sickly leaves arching toward the faint lights on the ceilings. In a connected chamber, a lake of shewanella bacterium hummed as they turned even more waste into weak electricity, which was fed into the decay pit's simple grow lights.

This far down, low oxygen levels and carbon dioxide pockets posed a continual threat. Since CO<sub>2</sub> was denser than good air, the gas continually flowed down the cave, at times building to dangerous levels in the pit. As a result, Alna and I always wore extra air and rebreathers.

Despite that, we gasped for each breath, while the pit's humid, rotten stench kept a continual backwash of vomit in my throat. The heat also dripped sweat from my body, a feeling I'd never felt before and now hated with a passion. Whenever the ice fetchers dragged one of the rare blocks of air to the pit, I'd stand near the ice to both cool off and breathe the fresh air as it sublimated away.

Several times each day other low kids dragged sacks of rotten food or compost to the pit and we'd crank them through an

ancient grinder before dumping everything into the pit. I often stared at the grinder's pointed glass fingers, which were still sharp despite 600 years of grinding, and wondered at the power of the humans and AIs who created all this. Then I'd cuss them for sticking me with such a life.

Alna, though, loved the work. She made snowballs out of the muck and threw them at me. When I once muttered that this job would kill us, she shook her head and dipped a bare hand into the decay pit. "Can you feel Omare?" she asked.

I said she was as crazy as my brother. She pursed her lips and kissed me on the side of my rebreather, thanking me for the compliment.

Could I feel Omare? Yes. I felt his loss each and every day.

Omare died less than a year after he defied Big Mom by marrying Alna. While middle workers occasionally married low kids, moms never did. But as usual, Omare didn't do what everyone told him to do. Big Mom sentenced him to work the decay pits until he changed his mind. Omare never did.

One cold night, when the exchangers poured almost no heat into the low kids' area of the cave, Omare returned from the pits with the coughing fever. Alna and I stayed awake worrying over him. With the air too poor to risk candles, Alna opened her portable glow tube and lit the bub in the faint green of bioluminescence. Each time Omare coughed, Alna pounded his back to clear the congestion. Each smack caused the foxfire inside the glow tube to flicker, almost as if the modified mushrooms feared for Omare's life.

After what seemed like hours, Omare finally regained his breathing. When the tick-tock clock chimed its regular call for more air, he released a burst of freshness from the oxymix canister. He then asked what I thought of the AIs who sent us on this mission.

"What do I think?" I whispered in anger. "What type of people sacrifice future generations to a life of pain and cold, with only the promise of a new life if we behave? Every big mom deserves to decay for this."

"That's just it," Omare said. "The big moms aren't human. They don't see life as we do."

"But they reborn us," Alna said softly in the dark, her low kid slang clipping gently over us. "Don't talk this, or you get decayed."

"They won't reborn us," Omare said knowingly. "Why reborn a bunch of know-nothing humans, who lived without the most basic tech? Beside, this planet isn't taking us home. We're already a hundred years past the pickup point. We have to seek our own rebirths."

Alna shifted nervously. Like me, she was both excited and fearful at the idea that we could manage our own rebirths. We waited for Omare to say more, but instead he moaned. Alna cradled Omare's burn-hot body while I passed into sleep, thinking on Omare's words. I woke hours later to Omare's face a finger-touch from mine in the green-tinted dark. "You should have been chosen, not me," he whispered. "The AIs are master manipulators."

I nodded, even though I didn't know what he meant. The Aursals had chosen him, not Big Mom, who wasn't even an AI anymore. "Don't worry about it," I said.

Omare was silent, not appearing to breathe. Worried, I touched

his frighteningly hot cheek, then wiped his forehead with the water rag. Even though the wind-up clock hadn't chimed its reminder for air, I vented a little extra from the canister.

Omare sighed and closed his eyes. Just as I started to doze off, he whispered in my ear. "Reborn this world. That's our test. That's our burden."

"How can we reborn a whole world when we can barely stay alive?" I asked. He smiled, but didn't say anything more before falling asleep. I wiped his forehead a final time then also fell back asleep.

When the clock next chimed for air, he was dead.

Alna cried, but I told her to hush. "We have to get Omare to an airlock," I said. "Rush him to ice before the moms find out."

Alna whispered agreement. While Alna readied my slush suit, I grabbed a pail of air then ran through the spiral tunnel to the low kids' communal bub. Two of our friends, Luck and Tuck, lived there with maybe fifty others. Luck and Tuck were a sister and brother who'd always been low kids. While Luck and Tuck mostly kept to themselves, they were also hard workers, and always ready to help a friend.

I found them in the communal bub's mass of stenching, shivering bodies, and told them about Omare. Tuck grabbed his slush suit while Luck put on her air pail and ran to help Alna drag Omare to the reserve airlock, which was rarely guarded. I popped into my slush suit, pumped in a supply of air from our canister, then climbed to the airlock to find Alna holding Omare's head to her chest. I promised her we'd bury Omare's body deep in the oxygen layer. "Cover him good, so moms don't find," she said.

I nodded and carried Omare into the lock. As Tuck cranked the lock through its venting cycle, I prayed that the Aurals would protect my brother until our planet once again left Aural space. That those amazing humans and AIs who lived among the stars would reborn his frozen body. That one day in the far future Omare and I would be reunited.

But the Aurals must not have been listening, because as the air emptied from the lock and I rolled the door to the side, all I saw were the cold, face-masked eyes of Gunetar and his goons.

By the end of our third month in the decay pit, Alna and I had the cough, the same hack and crack which killed Omare. Each day we climbed down from our bub and reported to the pit boss, a wannabe-mom named Handle who never spoke a word. But he was big and strong, and when he pointed at a job we did what he wanted without question. The one time Alna smarted off to him, he backhanded her a meter into the pit.

At first the other low kids treated me with suspicion. Only Luck and Tuck and Alna taught me how to survive in the bad air and harsh work of the lower cave. Alna explained that this was simply how low kids were. "They can't know you. Think maybe you mom spy, so they watch. Be patient."

Alna was right. As more time went by, I began to be accepted. Once, as I ate breakfast in the low kids' kitchen, someone asked why my brother married a low kid. I shrugged and said he loved Alna, which was true. Another asked if they could have a bub house like mine. I said they had to ask Big Mom, which caused curses all around.

One day the cave shook, sending waves across the decay pit and disturbing the electric bacteria so much they shut down

light power. Alna and I sat very still in our little boat, listening to the waves ripple the shoreline rocks. I told Alna the cave had been built to withstand quakes far worse than this. She didn't say anything, but her hand snatched mine in a painfully tight grip. Only when the lights glowed again, and our fear of being entombed in the pit's sea of muck vanished, did she let go.

That wasn't our worst day in the pit. That happened when Gunetar and his enforcers dragged a mom to the pit. The man, an aged astronomer for whom I'd once repaired a slush suit, was silent as Gunetar strapped him to the grinder. Alna started to protest, but I silenced her by pointing to the squad of twenty enforcers who stood just outside the main entrance. Those moms wore space suits so black that I had trouble seeing where the suits ended and shadows began. Their space suits worked much like our slush suits, meaning you had to mechanically crank in air supplies. But what really mattered was that their suits were indestructible. The moms also carried combat cleavers, whose large glass-like blades could cut through ice and flesh with equal ease.

"You, boy," Gunetar yelled at me, "get over here."

I trudged over. Gunetar told me to crank the grinder. I glanced at the old man strapped down before me, who stared calmly at the ceiling. Alna said she'd turn the crank, but Gunetar told her to shut up. I leaned over the condemned man and whispered my apologies.

"It's not your fault," the man said in his sing-song educated voice. "And if it had to be anyone, I'm glad it's Omare's brother."

"Get to cranking," Gunetar ordered. I turned the crank, and the man slowly moved toward the row of glass cleavers. Gunetar had strapped the man in so his feet hit the cleavers first. To the man's credit he didn't scream until his ankles started to be ground to fingernail size pulp. I cranked as fast as I could, but the grinder wasn't built for speed.

The man died when the grinders reached his knees, all his blood spurting into the exhaust tray. I kept cranking until there was nothing left but bloody kibble, which rattled and poured down the tray into the pit.

Gunetar slapped me on the back. He asked if I wanted to know what crime the man had committed.

"It doesn't matter," I said.

Gunetar cut his face into his ugly, wide smile. "Exactly. That's exactly what I was going to say."

Thankfully, that was the only execution we attended during our time in the pit. The following week, Alna and I were eating lunch when Handle walked up with Luck and Tuck. The sister and brother grinned from ear to ear as they told us we could get out of here. Handle nodded authoritatively.

"Here's a deal," Luck said, sounding sassier than I'd ever heard her sound. "You can stay in decay two years, or Handle pull you to other jobs for ten years. Other jobs much better."

I nodded in excitement. Alna and I wouldn't last a year in the pit. Alna, though, was her usual suspicious self. "Why so lenient? And why you talk for Handle?"

Luck and Tuck giggled, and Luck slapped Handle on his massive back. "Handle no never talk, except to me and Tuck. And Omare. He loved talk Omare, and he don't want you go like him."

I tried to shut Alna up at that point. After all, why question good luck. But of course she couldn't go quietly. "So you decay

Omare, but we get good work?"

Handle glanced at me with that familiar gaze, which meant he was really seeing my twin's face. "He tried," Tuck whispered. Tuck rarely talked, usually letting his sister speak for him. "Handle offered Omare a pull. Omare refused. Omare wanted death."

Alna screamed and tried to hit Tuck, but I held her back as I thanked the pit boss. Handle scratched his bald head, then nodded. However, Luck and Tuck grinned. They obviously weren't done dealing.

"One more thing," Luck said. "We want to be bummates. You got bub. You got one boy girl, we got a girl boy."

Alna glanced from Luck to Tuck to me and smirked. I looked into Luck's blue eyes, which stared like puddles of warm water on an icy cave floor. To my surprise, vertigo hit and my legs shivered slightly.

"I take that as a yes," Luck said with a laugh.

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Omare once told me the cave wasn't supposed to work like this. We were all supposed to be moms. Not big moms, but moms all the same.

But after barely five years on this planet, with the expedition still starting out but well past the point where humanity's advanced tech could rescue us, things went bad. The heat exchangers didn't provide as much heat as the big moms had promised. The food was poor and the work hard. For many members of the expedition, who had given up lives of high tech and been forced to bio-engineer their bodies to survive in bad air and cold, the knowledge that they'd be frozen at death and revived into their old lives was no longer enough.

A group of humans revolted against Big Mom. But Big Mom and her supporters, with their access to indestructible space suits and military cleavers, soon triumphed. Those who'd rebelled were pushed further down the cave, where their kids and kids' kids were allowed to work for the heat needed to survive. Thus the low kids and middle workers were born. The lows kids worked the worst jobs, while the middle did those skilled jobs the moms didn't want. Just as good air goes bad as it drops, and heat rises to those on top, the moms had the best of both.

"You know what truly scares me?" Omare asked one day when he visited me in my suit repair room. I had no idea what scared Omare. I knew what scared me: Freezing to death. Choking on poorly mixed air. Getting beat by the enforcers. Not having enough food or warmth. But I figured Omare's fears wouldn't be anything so mundane, and I was right.

"What scares me are the Aurals," he said. "The more I learn of our history, the more I think the Aurals used Eur's eccentric orbit to trap us in their system."

"Why would they do that?" I asked. "They're so powerful they could have taken humanity by force and done what they wanted."

"I know," he said. "That's the confusing part. The Aurals are vastly stronger than our AIs. But I'm certain the Aurals used Eur to remove a sample of humanity from the big moms' control. I think they even caused this planet to leave its regular orbit as a means of trapping us."

I thought about that. The Aurals sent their home world into a new orbit long before humanity reached into space. If what Omare said was true, that indicated a degree of foresight on the

Aurals' part which scared the crap out of me.

"Why do all that to trap a few thousand people?"

"Because they have plans for us – plans which don't involve our AIs."

Omare pulled a history book from his backpack. I was secretly jealous. Omare had access to all the expedition's written records and library. Me, I only had a room full of torn pressure suits. On the wall behind me hung thirty pressure suits in various stages of repair. While Omare played at his studies and over-thought every little thing, decades of the same work stared me in the face.

Omare opened the book to a section on ancient history. "I've been studying the ancient methods of creating alloys like steel," he said. "To create an alloy, you place various metals through heat and stress. The alloy that results has different – and often enhanced – properties from its parent elements."

"I know you aren't interrupting my work to suggest the Aurals are using this world to enhance us."

Omare grinned. "Think about it. Outside this system, every human is so integrated with tech and AIs that to kidnap us would be pointless. Those humans wouldn't know how to live because their culture is based around AI tech and control, and control and tech are all those humans know. But not here. Over the last six hundred years we've slowly changed, been slowly weaned off the AIs and their tech. Look at the low kids. They have different speech patterns, and a unique subculture with ritual beliefs like sublimation angels."

I sighed. I loved my brother, but I wished the Aurals had never selected him. He was obsessed with discovering the truth to everything, and one day Big Mom would crack down on him. But I also knew he was probably right. I thought about all the manipulation going on here – manipulation from the Aurals, from the countless AIs who ran humanity outside this system, and even from our own Big Mom. That's when I realized what truly scared me: my brother.

He was going to get both of us killed, and there was nothing I could do to stop it.

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Thanks to Luck and Tuck, Alna and I only worked in the decay pit two days each month. The siblings said Handle didn't like people dying for no reason. So once he decided to trust you, he rotated you in and out of the most dangerous jobs.

Due to my skill at managing and repairing slush suits, I found myself working in the cave's supply air lock. Because the air lock extended above Eur's frozen atmosphere, the supply rooms were always extremely cold, with a slick patina of ice coating the rocks. A long spiral ramp ran from the lock to the cave's different levels. Every day, teams of low kids donned their slush suits and hiked into the near vacuum to mine loads of oxygen and nitrogen and other gases. They then dragged the ice blocks back by sled and lowered them to different parts of the cave system, where other low kids cut up and sorted the frozen gases into needed mixes and let them sublimate.

Even though you'd think those ancient suits could take everything thrown at them, the low kids continually found ways to rip them apart. I worked nonstop repairing their suits, each time earning thanks and an extra ration or pail of frozen air from the grateful person whose life depended on my repair. I also continually lectured people on how much air they needed

in their suits, and how long they could stay on the surface. Even though anyone wearing a suit was supposed to know their air tables, most of the low kids gleefully pushed the safety limits.

One day I sat stitching a patch over a ragged slush suit when Luck walked into the repair room. She wore her slush suit with the helmet off; just outside the door I saw a sled loaded with air canisters.

"Where you go?" I asked, slipping into low kid speak without meaning to.

Luck smiled her prettiest smile, which lit her face in heart-jumping ways to the room's green glow-tube light. "Observatory. Wanna go? I never see stars without a suit."

The observatory was set a kilometer across the ash. Luck and I dragged the sled quickly, taking care to not wear ourselves out or use too much air. Omare had interned in the observatory, and I'd always wanted to see it. When we reached the site, I was astounded to see a clear bubble rising fifty meters above the surrounding mirror ash, looking for all the world like a giant version of that tuber Omare and I had been placed in as kids. Inside the massive bubble, ceramic and glass telescopes scanned the heavens as they rotated on a series of hand-cranked gears. On the lower level of the observatory sat row after row of book shelves, the famous library I'd never been allowed to visit.

After delivering fresh air to the observatory's store room, Luck and I snuck behind a telescope to watch the stars. One of the moms saw us, but he was a young-looking guy and, in kindness, pretended not to notice. Leaning against the clear bubbled wall, Luck and I held hands and snuggled and kissed as we pointed at both the stars and the Aurals blazing across the sky.

Eventually, Luck grinned in her cute but serious way. She pointed at the young astronomer beside us. "Ask if true," she whispered. "That we not going home."

"I can't. That's a forbidden question." I thought of the astronomer I'd been forced to kill, and wondered if he'd asked this very question and been condemned for it.

"You can. You Omare brother."

When she said that, I knew I'd already lost the argument. So I stood up and walked to the astronomer, trying to make sure I asked the question in my best imitation of proper mom grammar. The astronomer stared at me in curiosity and shock. At first I thought he was puzzled by me speaking like a mom, but I soon realized this man must have known Omare. He was seeing my brother in my face.

After glancing around to make sure no one would hear, the astronomer waved me closer. "Are you Omare's brother?" he whispered.

I nodded.

The astronomer hugged me tight for a moment, then stepped back, trying to control his emotions. "Omare was right," he said. "The older moms don't want to hear it, but his observations speak for themselves. We aren't going back."

"What do you mean?"

"According to your brother's calculations, this planet is being slowly moved into its original short-term orbit around the mother star."

Seeing my surprise, the astronomer nodded. "It's astounding," he said. "Omare observed a gravitational lens effect around certain stars. There's something out there distorting this system's

gravity – Omare believed it was a small singularity, which would account for Eur's frequent seismic activity. Just as he calculated, this singularity appears to be moving the planet back into a proper orbit around the Aural star."

"And Big Mom knows this?" I stammered. The astronomer nodded. He looked like he wanted to say more, but right then an older mom walked up and demanded to know what I was doing. I grabbed Luck's hand and we ran to the supply chamber, where our slush suits and sled waited.

As we dressed, Luck kissed me. "We aren't going back," she said. "No cushy shushy big momma rebirth for us."

I stared in shock at her. "How did you know?"

Luck kissed me again on the cheek, then whispered in my ear, "We low kids know things. We know all the things you need to know."

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That night Luck and I told our bub mates what the astronomer said. The glow tubes lit our fungal protein green as we ate, and we huddled together under a large blanket for warmth. Alna accepted the news that Eur wouldn't leave Aural space with calm resignation, while Tuck, much like his sister, seemed to have already known this fact.

"No big deal," Luck said.

"No big deal?" I asked. "If Eur doesn't leave Aural space, we'll never be rescued. At some point all the left-over tech keeping us alive – the slush suits, the glow tubes, the heat exchangers – will wear out. We'll freeze."

Luck and Tuck laughed, and even Alna smiled as if I was being silly. "What?" I asked.

"Think," Luck said. "You smart, but you miss true smarts. How long we supposed to live on Eur?"

"One orbit. Five hundred years. We're well past that."

Luck paused, waiting for me to catch what she saw as an obvious oversight. When I didn't understand, she asked how come all our fancy suits and heat exchangers hadn't worn out already.

"Because they were made to last," I said. "Because people like me repair them."

Luck shook her head. "No, silly. They work because someone magics them."

"Who? The Aurals?"

"Yes and no. But Aurals have hand in it."

I tried to argue. The Aurals weren't magic. They were simply a different form of life than humans, and possessed technologies we didn't understand. Luck and Tuck laughed at my explanations, and I grew so angry I retreated to my warmth bag.

When the clock chimed its first call for air, Luck climbed into my warmth bag. I tried to stay angry at her, but with her body pressing against mine that was impossible. While Alna and Tuck had kept things at basic bubmate level, Luck and I didn't see any reason for that. As Luck wrapped her long legs and arms around me, she whispered that the Aurals were magic. "They give us this planet," she said. "Their old home world. Now they move Eur back to orbit. Magic."

"That's not magic," I whispered back, feeling her lips next to my ear.

"You move planet?" she asked. "You do that?"

What could I say? No, I couldn't move a planet, but neither could I make a slush suit, heat exchanger, or cleaver. I could do

minor repairs on a suit, keep it cleaned and functioning. But the fact that I was so limited didn't make suits and cleavers magic, any more than the Aurals' abilities made them the same.

But when I explained this to Luck, she merely shook her head. "It not what they do," she explained. "It what they play. They play big joke on big moms."

I told her I didn't understand. She giggled and told me not to worry – that she still loved me even though I was so dense.

I laughed and hugged her close, and we both fell asleep happy.

The supply tunnels surrounding our cave were long, running for endless kilometers along the original surface of this planet. According to the moms, surveys of the planet while it was still outside the Aural system had not revealed any remnants of whatever civilization produced the Aurals. However, the surveys did show that before Eur's orbit was changed, the planet had an abundance of plant life and animals. Now the tunnels we cut through the frozen atmosphere lead us to frozen organics and water.

One day Alna and I worked four clicks down an older tunnel, hacking out a clump of organics and water for the decay pit. Or perhaps I should say, I was hacking away. I turned around to find Alna had disappeared.

I cursed as I checked my suit's air supply. The gauge's needle said just under two hours, which was enough time to drag this chunk of frozen organics back to the pit. But I didn't have time to do that and look for Alna. Irritated, I lost my temper and slashed my cleaver against a frozen fern entombed in the ice wall. I then followed Alna's faint boot prints down a side tunnel.

There are accurate maps of these tunnels in the library, maps hand drawn on stiff sheets of carbon and paper. And I knew all the animals that once lived on this planet were long dead. But walking the dark tunnels alone, with only the faintest glimmer of a glow tube to light the way, I imagined monsters to every flick and stab of shadow. Perhaps whatever force brought forth the Aurals on such a primitive world had also enabled a monster or two to survive.

I followed Alna's tracks into a new-looking tunnel. I hesitated, afraid to enter the tunnel. You never knew when a new-dug tunnel might collapse. Even stranger, this tunnel appeared to have been melted through the ice, instead of chipped by cleaver. But from the fresh boot prints leading inside, Alna had come this way.

I gripped my glow tube tight as I entered the tunnel. I saw a green glow ahead, which revealed a human shape. I stepped up, expecting to see Alna leaning against the tunnel wall.

Instead I saw my brother's dead face, glowing from foxfire etching every pore of his body.

I screamed, and dropped my glow tube. It rolled across the icy tunnel, the light appearing and disappearing to a jumbled code of illumination. Suddenly the flickering tube floated into the air and back toward me. I pulled the ice cleaver from my suit's tool slot and held it like a shield, but as the tube neared I saw Alna held it.

She placed a hand on my suit and shouted/whispered, "Clumsy...you." She then twisted the glow tube off, so I could see nothing but the green glow from my brother.

He was encased in the frozen carbon dioxide which made up most of the ice at this level. I stepped forward with my ice cleaver held high, ready to free my brother, when Alna grabbed

me. "What...you...do?" she asked in horror.

"Free...him."

"No. He angel. Sublimation angel."

She referred to the clouds of sublimating air, like the one we'd created on the surface for Omare. I started to protest, to tell her that we'd both seen Omare's body ground to pieces. But by the faint light coming from Omare I saw that Alna's eyes were the sanest I'd seen since my brother's death. I looked back at Omare and I swear he'd moved. He now smiled, a smile frozen in CO<sub>2</sub>. But that was crazy.

Again, I glanced around this new tunnel, trying to understand how it – and my brother's body – had come to be here. I asked Alna what was further down the tunnel, but she said the tunnel simply ended. "Nothing there," she said. "Just wall."

I was still trying to understand what this meant when Alna pointed at my air gauge and said we had to leave.

We made it back to the cavern with only a few minutes of good air left. As I removed my stinking helmet, I asked Alna what the hell we'd just seen.

"What we seen," she said, "is Omare. Reborn."

I refused to accept that. I told her we'd seen his body ground to kibble. Alna nodded her head, as if all this made perfect sense. When I asked her to explain, she muttered something about the Aurals and walked away with a happy smile on her face.

I kicked the cold rock wall until I thought my slush suit boots would break.

That night Alna told Luck and Tuck what we saw, but I refused to talk about it. When Luck snuggled up to me, asking if I now believed in the Aurals, I pushed her away.

"You is dumb and dumb," she said. "What it take, make you true low kid?"

"Handle," Tuck suggested. "He need talk Handle."

Great, I thought. Talking with a low kid supervisor who never talks will convince me the Aurals are magic. Not for the first time, I wondered when the universe had gone crazy, and if I was the only sane person left in the cave.

Despite my misgivings, in the morning Luck dragged Alna and me to see Handle. The giant supervisor stood a full head taller than me, and he seemed irritated that Luck expected him to actually speak. He waved for us to leave, but Luck punched him in the gut, her tiny impact barely even registering on Handle's massive girth. But Handle appeared shocked at the assault, and when Luck mentioned our discovery of Omare's body, he nodded sagely.

Handle glanced around, then whispered. "I know what you're feeling," he said. "I discovered his body in the ice down there a few weeks back. But last year, I also saw Gunetar grind up Omare's dead body. I can't figure out what the Aurals are doing with all this."

I stared in shock at Handle, from his massive muscles and broad chest to his eyes, which were suddenly alive with an intelligence I'd never noticed. Alna also seemed surprised. "You sound like Big Mom," she said. "Same talk she talk."

Handle laid a beefy hand on each of our shoulders, his fingers both gentle and threatening as they caressed the bones under our skin. "I trust you two will keep my secret. Only Luck and Tuck know, and they're my distant, far distant, grandkids." He

then smiled. "Of course, the way Luck looks after Chicka, I imagine I'll be having more descendants soon."

I nodded, not knowing what to say. Handle then hugged me to his body with the strongest grip I'd ever felt. "Welcome to the family," he said.

That night in the bub, Luck and Tuck were extremely excited that we finally knew about Handle. Luck clapped her hands and kissed me for good measure. I saw Tuck try to kiss Alna, but she pushed him off.

"So good you know," Luck said. "Hard keeping secrets from bubmates."

"So what is Handle, a mom?"

Luck giggled. "He not mom. He big mom. Older than our Big Mom."

"Why didn't you tell us?" I asked, trying to wrap my understanding around Handle being the same as Big Mom – an AI now living as human. Then I remembered that Handle had said he was the great-great-whatever grandfather of Luck and Tuck. "Wait. I didn't know AIs could have kids."

"What they do, they do," Luck said, grinning as she waved her hands at me like she was some ancient magician conjuring up a spell. "Lookie me. I'm part AI!"

We all laughed.

"So why didn't you tell us?" I asked.

"Wasn't Alna," Luck said. "Was you. You were mid kid. Born momma's boy. Handle say not tell moms or mid kids who he is."

"I'm not any of those now," I said.

"No, you not," Luck laughed as she hugged me close. "Now you low low low."

In the weeks that followed, word spread quickly among the low kids about Omare's body, creating a steady stream of trekkers to see the sight. Alna said seeing Omare's frozen body, with the knowledge that he'd been decayed, gave low kids hope that they too might one day be reborn. Some low kids were so Aural struck that when Alna and I lead them to see Omare, we had to remind them to crank the carbon dioxide scrubbers on their suits.

To my surprise, Handle often stood in the tunnel observing Omare's body. He'd stand there for hours in his slush suit. Sometimes I'd walk back to the cave for fresh air, and when I returned Handle would still be standing before Omare. I wondered why his suit didn't run out of air. I also wondered why Handle looked so fit and young if he was truly older than Big Mom herself. Was there something about these former AIs everyone was missing?

I asked Luck about all this, but she merely cocked an eye at me. "You not got enough work to do?" she said. "Handle give more work, you don't shut up."

I laughed and said I'd shut up.

When I wasn't needed on work details or to escort low kids to see Omare, I continued repairing slush suits. Once a month Luck and I dragged supplies to the observatory. On our next trip I saw the young astronomer who'd been friends with Omare. I wanted to tell him about Omare's body, but Luck shook her head and said it was forbidden. "Only low kids can know."

I nodded. Only us low kids.

Then came the day Luck didn't show up for our observatory trip. Instead, Handle dragged the sled of air canisters to the air-

lock. "Luck's not feeling well," he said. When I looked panicked, he laughed. "Don't worry. She just ate something that didn't agree with her and feels queasy. Can't risk her throwing up in a slush suit, can we?"

Handle asked me to help him drag the sled, although I didn't have a clue why a man as big as him needed help. To my surprise, he attached a disk the size of my thumbnail to the outside of my slush suit helmet. "We can talk through this without touching," he said.

I was shocked. "It this high tech?" I asked as Handle absently wound his suit's CO<sub>2</sub> tick-tock scrubber.

"No. Just something I rigged up."

It seemed like tech to me, but I didn't say anything more as we pushed the sled across the mirror ash.

The hardest part about traveling to the observatory was that the path was so old you continually brushed the mirror ash aside, causing the oxygen underneath to bubble away. As a result, I kept brushing the ash back over the exposed air. After my umpteenth time doing this, I must have grumbled because Handle asked if I knew why the Aurals had preserved Eur's frozen air under mirror ash.

"I don't know. Omare once said it was part of their plan to temper us. To make us stronger, or some crap."

Handle laughed, but to my surprise it wasn't at Omare's theory. "Omare and I often debated that 'alloy' analogy of his," he said. "I must admit when he showed me the numbers proving the Aurals were pushing the planet back into its regular orbit, his theory suddenly sounded as good as anything I'd heard."

I started to ask if the Aurals were helping us, like so many of the low kids believed, but Handle spoke before I could say anything. "Don't believe that" he said.

"Excuse me?"

"You're anthropomorphizing the aliens. Don't assume they're helping us. We truly don't know anything about these creatures."

I bristled at how Handle knew my question before I asked it. Outside this system, big moms were supposed to read and control minds. I remembered how Big Mom had been able to see through my lie all those months ago, and I wondered if she and Handle could still do this, even though they supposedly gave up their AI abilities before coming to the planet. But Handle laughed when I asked about this. "I can't read your mind," he said. "If I could still do that, we might as well have all our old high tech. Hell, I might as well still be an AI."

"Why are the Aurals so hostile toward our technology?"

"I didn't say they were hostile to our technology, although that's what the most AIs believe. Myself, I wonder if they simply don't like what the combination of humanity, its tech and AIs have become."

I stared at Handle, wondering what life had been like for him as an AI. But when I asked, he said it would be like trying to explain what human life was like to a newborn baby.

"No offense," he said, "but I can't explain what my life was like before I gave everything up for this body."

I muttered that I wasn't offended, even though I was.

"That's what I mean," Handle said with a laugh. "That sarcastic tone to your voice. When I was an AI, I had powers beyond your comprehension. But despite that, I never truly understood humanity. It's taken me centuries of living as human to compe-

hend sarcasm. If the gulf between humanity and we AIs is so wide, imagine the distance between humanity and the Aurals."

"What about you? Are the Aurals as far above you AIs as you are above humans?"

Handle paused for a moment, and I knew that despite once being an AI, he'd been human long enough for my comment to hit a nerve. "Yes. We AIs can't approach the Aurals in power and ability. Our theory is that they are a naturally occurring intelligence with AI-like abilities, but we don't know for certain. I mean, they told us this was their home world, yet there's no evidence of any Aural ever living here. Did they lie, or are we unable to understand what they meant? I honestly don't know."

I wanted to hear more, but by that point we neared the observatory and there wasn't time for talk. Handle removed the talking disk from my helmet and placed his hand on my shoulder so we could talk the old fashioned way. "Just remember," he said. "The whole reason for this expedition was to find answers to the very questions you are asking. So don't feel bad at not knowing more about the Aurals than we did six hundred years ago."

For the next month, things went pretty much as they always had. We low kids hauled frozen air and water and organics to keep the cave alive, and the moms left us alone.

To my surprise, Luck asked me to marry her. Her water blue eyes had eaten their way into my soul, so I said yes even though I worried about the life I'd be bringing our kids into. Alna and Tuck and our friends scrounged all the slush suits they could find and took us to the surface for the ceremony. As we said our dues, holding hands so only the two of us could hear what was said, I felt the happiest I'd been since Omare died.

Then came the day a low kid was decayed alive. Six teenage low kids had been dragging nitrogen blocks down an airless tunnel when Gunetar confronted them, telling them to hurry up or he'd decay them. One of the low kids laughed at Gunetar, which shouldn't have mattered except the kid laughed just as Gunetar touched his suit. Gunetar heard the insult and lost control, ordering his enforcers to drag the kid to the decay pit. Luck and Alna and I were working nearby when Gunetar threw the teenager onto the grinder. When we heard the boy's screams we came running, as did many of the other low kids.

Gunetar was almost finished grinding the boy's body when he and the moms realized they were outnumbered. But they wore their indestructible space suits, and by flashing their cleavers they forced the low kids to back out of the way.

But I remembered something I'd learned during long hours of repairing suits. How a fancy space suit might stop stuff from penetrating, but momentum and force could still hurt the person inside. I mentioned this to Alna, and fire jumped her eyes as she grabbed a heavy spar used to steer the ice sleds. She smashed a mom across his back. He fell and rolled across the rock floor. Other low kids grabbed additional spars and beat the fallen mom. Soon blood flowed under that unbreakable face-mask, and the man inside no longer breathed.

With the long spars, we held off the moms, and whenever one of them fell down we smashed his suit until his body bled. Alna turned out to be an amazing leader, yelling at us to stand here or there so the moms couldn't cut us off. Finally Gunetar called a retreat, and the moms grabbed their dead and injured and ran

for the safety of the higher cave.

When Handle came to see what had happened, he merely shook his head in irritation. "Try not to make it as bloody as last time," he muttered before walking back down the tunnel.

Handle called it a cold war, a historical joke I didn't pretend to understand. But the practical point was that after the first encounter no further blood was spilled. Our group of low kids barricaded ourselves in the decay pit work area, meaning we had access to the food growing there. Unfortunately, we didn't have enough good air to last longer than a few days. Without a constant supply of oxygen to counteract all the carbon dioxide in this part of the cave, we'd soon fall asleep and never wake up.

We tried to reach the other groups of low kids scattered around the cave, but the moms cut them off. As for the middle workers, they stayed neutral, which meant our little group was isolated. The moms also blocked all the supply tunnels which might lead to any extra supplies of oxygen.

As a result, the focal point of the standoff became the main tunnel leading into the upper cave. At one end stood we low kids, armed with spars and hiding behind overturned sleds and muck boats. The moms lined up in their suits at the other end of the tunnel. We taunted each other, but neither side moved to test the other's resolve.

After two days of standoff, Big Mom strode forward to talk with us. She walked confidently, looking stronger and far younger than I remembered from when Alna and I had been dragged before her last year.

"I will speak to this Alna," she announced.

I glanced nervously at Luck and Tuck, wondering how Big Mom knew Alna was leading us. I told Alna it might be a trap, but she waved my concerns away. "Talk is talk," Alna said. "We got nothing else to do."

I followed Alna as she walked out to greet Big Mom, even though being near the armed enforcers scared me silly.

"Ah Chicka," Big Mom said when she saw me. "I should have known you'd be involved in this."

"What do you offer?" Alna said sharply.

Big Mom looked suspicious. "Who told you I'd make an offer?"

"Only reason you would leave that warm bub is to cut a deal. And I think, why moms not attack us last two days? Again, I think you want deal."

Big Mom didn't seem to believe us, and suddenly I felt that familiar tickling against my scalp. Somehow, somehow, this damn AI could still read minds. But we were telling the truth, and she smiled upon learning this. "You low kids are smarter than people think. Okay, here's my offer: You surrender and go back to work, and all is forgiven."

"Thatit?" Alna asked, surprised. "Nopunishment? Notrouble?"

Big Mom nodded. "As you say, no punishment, no trouble."

"But what do you get out of it?"

Big Mom smiled, a smile without all wrinkles she'd had the last time I saw her. "What I get is for things to be like they were before. And what you get is to keep on living. Even as we speak the cave's CO<sub>2</sub> is flowing toward you. Once your portable air supplies run out, you will die. So I suggest you accept my offer soon."

With that, Big Mom returned to the main cave. I was excited by

Big Mom's offer and said we should surrender, but Alna wouldn't hear of it. "What you think moms do?" she asked. "Just pat our butt and say okay? No. They grind us up. Grind us all up."

Reluctantly, I agreed with Alna's reasoning. The moms had to make an example out of our group of low kids. Otherwise, all the low kids would rise against them. Even though I tried my best to avoid fights, it was no secret what Gunetar would do to us if we surrendered.

I knew this wouldn't end well, but what else could we do?

The four of us made our bub in a nook of a tunnel, near enough to the decay pit that we stayed warm, but far enough back that we didn't continually smell the stinking air. We slept on top of our slush suits and cranked our pails of air and pretended we were back in our cubbyhole home.

Even though Alna was still our bubmate, she rarely slept. She paced the pit at all hours, rallying the scared low kids and making sure we didn't let our guard down and get overrun. Tuck followed after her, helping in any way he could as he tried in vain to win Alna's heart.

So it was that Luck and I had the temporary bub to ourselves most of the time. Luck dug some dried ochre out of a waste pile and coated the tunnel walls in dabs of orange and red. We joked about what a lousy honeymoon this had been.

Then Luck told me she was pregnant. "We have to tell Handle," she said.

Handle wasn't surprised. "I figured as much," he said, "what with her having trouble keeping food down. I wish you both the best."

Luck thanked Handle. I asked if there was anything he could do to stop the CO<sub>2</sub> from flowing down to us. "Do?" he asked. "What do you mean, do? You are low kids. You are trapped. Enjoy life while you can, because this standoff won't end well."

Luck glared at him with shocked eyes. "You not help?" she asked. "You? Older than Big Mom but look younger than me? You help you, but not us?"

Handle didn't say anything. Luck hit him, and hit him again, then stormed back to our bub. Handle shook his head sadly at me. "Your brother would have understood," he said.

I stared at him, troubled by something I couldn't begin to explain. "Did you hear Big Mom's offer?" I asked.

"Yes. You should take it. All of you should."

"You don't think the moms will try to punish us?"

"And if they do? Anything is better than what you face right now."

I started to ask why Handle didn't think he faced the same dangers we did, but decided not to push the issue. Not knowing what else to do, I walked to the bub to comfort Luck.

That night I stood guard with Tuck. As the hours passed, the moms glared at us from their side of the tunnel, and we glared back. The moms looked as fresh as ever, with all that damn good air to warm their hearts. At one point Gunetar walked by to check on his people. He saw me and flashed that nasty face-wide smirk of his. I gave him the finger, which enraged him so much he had to be restrained to keep from charging me.

Once Gunetar was gone, I asked Tuck what his sister had meant, that Handle could help himself but not us. Tuck didn't

answer, only looked at me with his usual dead eyes. I'd always taken those eyes to mean a lack of understanding, but I now knew that was simply how he kept his secrets to himself.

By the time Tuck and I finished guard duty, we were so exhausted we collapsed into the bub. I snuggled up to Luck and she moaned softly from whatever dream she was having. I kissed her neck and quickly fell asleep.

I woke to Tuck shaking me. He held his finger to his lips for silence and pointed down the tunnel. At first I didn't see anything. Then a giant shape appeared, a shape that could only be Handle in a slush suit.

Tuck quickly helped me into my slush suit, then he attached a full air tank to my back. I asked Tuck if he wanted to come, but he whispered that his place was defending the pit with Alna. I asked him to keep an eye on Luck, then hurried after Handle.

I kept my glow stick shut, so my only light was the faint glow from Handle's stick, which beckoned me through the tunnels like a hauntingly peaceful ghost. We quickly entered a supply tunnel which lead to the frozen water and frozen organics. It also lead to Omare's body.

Sure enough, when we reached the newly cut tunnel where Omare's body lay, Handle stopped. I waited at the tunnel entrance, watching Handle as he stood before Omare for what seemed like near on forever. He waited so long that I began to worry about my air supply. But then he turned and walked deeper into the new tunnel, even though the tunnel merely dead-ended a little ways down.

That's when Handle disappeared.

I twisted my glow tube on and raced forward. Sure enough, the tunnel still ended in a sheer wall. I reached out my gloved hand and it fell through the wall before me. An illusion.

Before I followed Handle through the fake wall, I checked my tick-tock gauge to see how much air I had left. Since I'd started with a full tank I knew I should have another hour and a half of air left. But long years of managing suits had given me an instinctive feel for air. Even though Tuck had topped off my suit before I left, the air had a slight aftertaste to it, which shouldn't have occurred until I was running low.

To my shock, I had less than twenty minutes of air left.

My legs begged to collapse. My heart screamed. But I refused to panic, and fought my body into obeying me. I also cursed Tuck. I'd trusted him like a brother.

Air is a simple equation – either you have enough or you don't. It would take me at least an hour to walk back to the decay pit at this point and I didn't have the air to do that. My only choice was to die right here, or keep following Handle and hope he had a backup tank.

So I stepped through the imaginary wall. I didn't worry about Handle noticing me anymore and kept my glow tube open. For half a minute I followed him down this new tunnel, the green glow licking into the CO<sub>2</sub> and water ice and flickering back with frozen images of the swamps that used to line this ground. I thought about the primitive creatures that once lived here – creatures as far below me as I was below an AI or an Aural. I thought about Luck and our child. I thought about Alna and even damn-old Tuck. I refused to die here. I refused to give up.

And then, to my surprise, Handle disappeared yet again.

He had been standing maybe thirty meters in front of me. I

rushed to where he'd been, afraid I'd lost him in another illusion. Instead, the tunnel ended in a blackness which my glow stick couldn't dispel. I leaned over the edge and held out the glow stick. By its faint light I saw a massive shaft angle away to my right and left, and drop to perfect blackness below. The walls of the shaft had the smooth perfection of being created by high-tech.

The sides were so slick there was no way I could climb down. I assumed Handle had gone down because the roof of the shaft ended a few meters above the tunnel's opening. Not knowing what else to do, I dropped the glow tube over the edge. It fell forever until its light was lost in the darkness.

I now stood in perfect darkness. My suit's air reeked of coming death. I suddenly knew that Tuck had known about this shaft. He'd given me just enough air to get here, but not enough to return home. He'd wanted me to jump into the shaft after Handle.

Having no other options, I stepped forward into the dark, swearing that if I made it home I'd beat the crap out of my brother-in-law.

I'd like to say I didn't scream, but Omare always said not to lie. So yes, I screamed. I yelled and cursed until my ears rang inside my helmet.

Once that was out of my system, I remembered a physics lesson Omare taught me. How Eur was similar in size to old Earth, and how objects on Eur fell at  $9.8\text{m/s}^2$ . I started counting, trying to figure how long until the big splat. To my surprise, I counted well past 10 seconds, then 20. I quickly fell several kilometers, amazed that a shaft could be this deep.

Just as I began to wonder if I'd ever reach the end of the shaft, or if my air would run out first, I heard a faint whistling sound. I also saw a faint glow below and realized it was the glow tube I'd dropped earlier. The tube raced toward me and I braced for impact, but instead I slowed down. Gentle as can be, I landed on the stone floor beside the glow tube.

I heard a small thump behind me and turned to see Handle laughing inside a backlit doorway. He waved for me to follow him. We walked to a small indentation in the stone wall, which sealed behind us and lit up with the brightest lights I'd ever seen.

"I wish you could have seen your face as you fell," Handle said as he removed his helmet. "You're the first one with the guts to follow me over the edge."

I cautiously removed my helmet. The sweetest air I'd ever breathed flooded into my lungs. "I didn't have a choice," I said. "Tuck shortchanged my air. I either jumped or died."

Handle laughed even more. "That scoundrel. He followed me down the tunnel a few times, but never took the final leap into the shaft."

Handle shook his head at his great-whatever-grandson's ingenuity at tricking me, then lead me down the bright tunnel to a large, open space about fifty meters wide. Inside, the lights were so powerful they actually shone white. Plants grew everywhere – corn, wheat, spinach and many more I didn't know the name of. Their leaves were a deep, dark green, far beyond the paleness I'd always seen in our decay pit gardens.

Strange machines and technology lay everywhere. I glanced at what could only be a viewscreen and saw an image of myself falling through the shaft. I glanced at another screen and saw Luck yelling at – and then hitting – Tuck as he explained where

I'd gone. Another view showed the enforcers outside the decay pit. A final view showed Big Mom pacing her bub, arguing with Gunetar about how to handle the low kid rebellion.

"Do the Aurals know about this technology?"

"Of course they do. Even though we're 10 kilometers deep, I dare say they know all about this."

"Then why did you bury this so deep? And why haven't the Aurals killed us for using this tech?"

Handle sighed and collapsed into a cushioned chair. "This room wasn't buried to hide it from the Aurals. It was buried to hide it from humanity."

"What do you mean?"

"You have to understand that many humans didn't agree with the decision to undertake this mission. However, the invitation from the Aurals to travel into their system was too important to let humans decide. AI consensus was that we couldn't pass up this opportunity to learn about the Aurals."

A familiar anger welled inside me. "It isn't humanity's technology the Aurals don't like. It's you AIs."

Handle snorted. "That's a false distinction. Over the millennia we AIs – which, I remind you, humanity originally created – have so merged with human culture and lives that it is impossible to separate the two of us."

I glanced at the marvelous technology all around me. No doubt there was tech here to nourish my child with healthy food and air, and stop the moms from hurting even one more low kid. "Then why haven't you helped? Why have you let us suffer while you live such a healthy, long life?"

Handle nodded sagely. "I help in little ways – keeping the decay pit working, repairing the heat exchangers when they threaten to clog. But this lab wasn't designed to support an entire expedition. Only to aid here and there."

My hands shook with anger as I remembered how Handle had declined to help Luck when she asked. "You're lying."

The sage-like pose Handle had been striking disappeared. "Any particular reason for thinking that?"

"Answer me this: How did Big Mom survive all this time? How did she suddenly look so young the other day in the tunnel, when she looked near death only last year? And I know she can still read minds. She shouldn't be able to do that."

Handle shrugged. "It was dictated by the Aurals. Two AIs could travel into this system with the humans, but we had to use human bodies. We could also bring whatever tech was needed to keep Big Mom and I alive until the planet's orbit carried us back out, but nothing more. Tech support for the expedition was incidental."

I wanted to smack Handle's perfect-young body for all he and Big Mom had done. Omare was right – the AIs had manipulated us as much as the Aurals. Everyone manipulated everyone. The Aurals sent the planet to entice humans into their space. The big moms pretended they were sharing the suffering, but they really weren't. Damn them all.

I kicked a nearby machine. Handle's face blanched even though the machine merely hummed without complaint. "So Big Mom comes down here?"

"No. She and I were given separate duties and abilities, to keep us from trying to get rid of the other. She doesn't know how to get here. When I heal her body, I take the tech to her."

"But she knows this planet isn't going to take us out of Aural space."

"Yes."

"So she punishes people for merely speaking the truth. What were you two going to do – keep this insane world running for who-knows-how long by tricking people into still believing they'd be reborn?"

Handle shook his head. "I know you're angry, but you've only lost something you've never known. I gave up abilities beyond your understanding. And to know it was all for nothing..."

The old me would have hit Handle, but I knew he was attempting to explain – in his own arrogant way. I was tempted to keep talking to Handle, to learn the answers to puzzles and questions which had haunted my brother until his death. But now that I knew how much these AIs had manipulated everyone, I no longer cared for any answers Handle could give.

But to my surprise, Handle now begged for answers. He grabbed my right arm in a grip so powerful I thought my bones would break. "Tell me the truth," he said. "Why did they choose Omare?"

I stared in shock at him. "You don't know?"

Handle glared into me and I suddenly felt that eerie tickling in my scalp as he ran through my memories. But to my surprise, he couldn't learn the truth. "You're too angry to read," he said. He slammed me in front of a transparent machine, where he again asked why the Aurals choose Omare. I told him I didn't know. Handle stared at the machine's colorful wash of lines and words. He must not have liked what he saw, because he released my arm and collapsed to the floor, shaking his head.

"I thought you'd know," he said. "That maybe Omare told you something. He must have known what the Aurals were doing. I mean, they choose him."

I remembered what Luck had told me once – how the Aurals were playing a joke on the big moms – and realized my wife was wiser than anyone I knew. "So the Aurals played you like the big moms played us," I said. "Now what are you going to do?"

Handle shrugged. "I don't know. There's a massive amount of energy inside Omare's body, but the primitive tech here can't make an accurate reading. I suspect the energy in his body is similar to readings the Aurals give off."

I wanted to laugh at how Handle considered all this amazing technology primitive. But I didn't have time for this nonsense, not when everyone I cared about was waiting for either the moms or the bad air to kill them. I glanced around Handle's lair. "Is there anything in here that can save the low kids?"

Handle no longer cared. "I can give you a spare space suit, so you'll be protected like the moms. But my other tech is too precious to risk with you."

I ignored the insult. "Give me what you can." I then noticed a map on one of the viewscreens. The map looked strangely familiar, even though it was far more detailed than anything I'd ever seen. "Is that a map of the cave?"

"Yes."

"I'll also need a copy of that."

Whatever technology slowed my fall down the shaft also launched me back up. The new suit I wore contained powerful spot-lights, and I watched in amazement as my body flew through

the air toward a tiny tunnel I couldn't even see. I was afraid my occasional tumble would cause me to miss the target, but however the tech worked I slowed down and landed on the lip of the tunnel as if I had jumped there from a half meter away.

I quickly ran back to the decay pit, where the low kids screamed in fear at my bright-lit suit. Then Alna stepped toward me, holding her spar ready to strike. I twisted my helmet off and laughed as she and the others hugged me with excitement.

After explaining what I had learned – and after punching Tuck in the face, an action that Luck quickly added to tenfold – I explained my plan to the low kids. With the printed map Handle had given me, I showed them the hidden escape tunnels which lead to the surface from the decay pit. We could use those to evacuate, then reenter the cave through the surface airlocks. From there we could hook up with other low kid groups and have safety in numbers. And with our knowledge of Handle's hidden tech, we might even convince the middle workers, and a few moms, to join our fight.

"Risky," Alna said. "Once we go back to the cave, word will spread. Moms will think quick to find the new tunnels."

I nodded. "But Big Mom is up to something. She has been manipulating things for so long, she won't let us simply surrender. Since she knows about Handle and his tech, maybe she's worried he'll end up helping us. I think that's why she offered to let us surrender. If she thinks Handle is helping us, she'll send the moms against us sooner rather than later."

Alna and the other low kids agreed with my view, and everyone voted to risk the hidden tunnels.

"Since we only have a few slush suits," I said, "it'll take a number of trips to get everyone to safety. We'll send guards with each trip. Using this space suit will give us an edge."

Alna looked doubtful. "You fight in suit? You?"

"No. I can't fight worth a damn," I said as other low kids laughed in agreement. "But if you were in the suit..."

The low kids cheered. There had never been a low kid permitted to wear an actual space suit. The low kids hoisted Alna and paraded her around the decay pit until she told them to put her down so we could get to work.

As I stripped off the suit and handed it to Alna, she hugged me close. "You a true low kid now," she said. "True and good."

Figuring the first trip would be safest because we'd take the moms by surprise, I insisted Luck be among the group. As she donned her slush suit, I told her everything I'd seen in Handle's hidden lair.

"I want to see this hole," she said. "Be fun, to fall without hurt. See plants in real green."

I hugged her and promised that as soon as all this was over, I'd take her to Handle's lair, just the two of us.

"Yes," she said, laughing. "Just us two. My brother, he can't go."

Tuck was dressing in his suit beside us and he hung his head at his sister's comment. I smiled and slapped him on the back. "Let me push you off that shaft once and we'll call it even," I said.

Tuck smiled and we all laughed and then Alna stepped up in her bright lit suit and led us toward safety.

The hidden tunnel breached the surface near the observatory. As stealthily as we could we hiked back to one of the cave's side airlocks. There were ten of us in the group, with myself,

Alna, and Tuck as the guards, each carrying a long cudgel. We quickly cycled through the airlock and sneaked through the cave until we reached the communal bub of another low kid group, where quiet whispers and hugs greeted us. Alna, Tuck and I then refreshed our air and set off for the airlock and the hidden escape tunnel.

We managed two more trips that day, ferrying low kids to safety. Even though we tried to be careful, it was impossible not to leave tracks in the mirror ash. Each time we left the escape tunnel I tensed, prepared to battle any moms who might have tracked us down.

Then came the fourth trip. Tuck stepped out of the tunnel first, then waved for us when he didn't see any moms. Alna and I quickly followed, shepherding our nervous charges out. As always, the Aurals danced into the heavens, and the Crab Nebula grabbed its way across the sky.

That's when I saw sublimation angels smoking out of new gaps in the mirror ash. I'd never seen angels emerging naturally, and pointed them out to Alna just as the ash exploded and a squad of enforcers climbed out of a camouflaged hole, cleavers slashing at our slush suits.

Alna jumped between the low kids and the attacking moms. One of the moms stabbed her with a cleaver, then stared in shock as the cleaver bounced off Alna's suit. Alna flicked on her suit's light, blinding the mom, then smashed the enforcer with her cudgel. Tuck and I stood beside her, using her suit as a shield while we pushed and smashed the moms, giving the other low kids time to escape back to the tunnel.

Once the other low kids were safe, Tuck and I grabbed Alna and tried to drag her to the tunnel. Alna, however, didn't want to go. She waved for Tuck and me to escape while she protected us. Through our combined touch I heard Tuck's soft voice arguing with her. I glanced at Tuck, about to touch his shoulder and tell him to help me force Alna into the tunnel, when suddenly he let go of Alna and screamed a silent scream.

Alna and I fell back onto the ash as Tuck stood there with a long cleaver growing from his chest. Blood spewed across the mirror ash, and a sublimation angel rose from his suit to greet the sky.

Alna shouted something I couldn't hear and reached for Tuck. I jumped up, looking for his attacker, and saw Gunetar standing behind him. I charged and knocked him back with my cudgel. As he fell, I smashed him over and over until two other enforcers tackled me. Other moms piled onto Alna, who fought to reach Tuck.

By the time Gunetar picked himself back up, his wide wide face slit out the cruelest smirk I'd ever seen. The moms held Alna and me down and I knew we were about to die. I expected Gunetar to gloat, to tell me how much he'd hated Omare and me and how we didn't deserve rebirth. But to my surprise, he merely walked over to Alna and twisted her helmet off in an explosion of suddenly frozen air.

I've thought for many years on Alna's death. On why the sudden decompression didn't kill her. Those with a touch of science have told me that maybe enough of the planet's atmosphere had sublimated where we stood that Alna didn't immediately die. Others say that maybe Handle's suit, or some other remnant of his AI tech, briefly protected her.

I don't agree. As the air in Alna's suit disappeared in a rush of snow, she sat there for a moment with a puzzled look on her face. Then she stood up, shoving aside the surprised moms who held her with one powerful sweep of her arm. As the Aurals spun rainbow colors above us, and our images stared back from the mirrored surface, Alna looked at me and smiled. She said "I feel Omare," and the strange thing was that in that near vacuum we all heard her say the words. As clear as a bell.

She then leaned over Tuck's body. I don't know if Tuck was still alive, but I doubt it. Still, I hope some part of him saw Alna bend over his frozen facemask and place a single kiss there. She then sat down in the mirror ash and frozen oxygen and made a snow ball, which she threw at Gunetar's facemask. She nodded her head as if someone had whispered a deep, true secret in her ear, then made another snowball and threw it at me.

"Reborn," she said as she brushed mirror ash off her suit. "We'll reborn the whole damn thing." Then she died, looking as peaceful as if she'd merely gone to sleep.

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Instead of killing me, Gunetar dragged me to the main airlock, where he removed my suit and gagged and tied me. He then warned his enforcers not to say a word about what had happened. But our cave is a little world where gossip travels faster than heat. Maybe one of the low kids in the escape tunnel saw what happened to Alna. Maybe one of the mom enforcers couldn't keep quiet. Either way, by the time we left the airlock, crowds lined the spiral pathways. Low kids screamed and threw things at the enforcers and chanted Alna's name, while the middle kids and moms whispered among themselves and pointed at me in shock. Gunetar and his enforcers looked unnerved, and waved their cleavers in futile attempts to disperse the crowds.

When we reached Big Mom's bub, Gunetar encircled the dwelling with his enforcers. Crowds pushed against the suited moms, and for one brief moment I saw Luck as she smashed a cudgel against a helmeted figure. Luck waved at me before she and the rest of the crowd jumped back from the enforcers' flailing cleavers.

I didn't need to be Omare to know this was well on its way to being ugly. But before I could see more, Gunetar dragged me inside the bub and sealed the door. I lay stiff and unmoving as he told Big Mom what had happened on the surface. Big Mom walked to a window and stared at the crowds surrounding the bub. Something smashed against the unbreakable glass before her, causing Big Mom to fall back and curse.

Big Mom walked over to me. "I need you to go outside and tell people nothing happened."

"Gunetar murdered my friends," I said. "That's what happened."

"He was entirely justified. Alna lead the low kids to revolt against us; the other one dared to raise a weapon to us. I'll only ask one more time: Will you tell them nothing happened?"

I shook my head. I expected Gunetar to pull his cleaver and threaten me, but instead, Big Mom merely smiled. I felt a familiar ticking in my scalp, and knew she was trying to stick some command up there, to make me do her bidding.

Even though I've always been afraid of almost everything, and even though I've never been a hero like Omare or Alna or Tuck, I refused to give in to Big Mom. I wouldn't go out and lie merely so my child could one day be manipulated by this damn AI. As

Big Mom wormed her way into my head, I heard Alna speak her final words. How we would reborn the planet. I then remembered Omare saying the same thing shortly before he died. I wondered if that was the key. If that was what my brother had meant all along.

"Handle," I whispered.

"What?" Big Mom asked, leaning over me as the tickling stopped.

"It was Handle. He helped Alna on the surface. He has tech."

Big Mom looked suspicious. "Handle is sworn not to interfere in cave affairs unless I ask him."

"Where do you think the suit Alna wore came from?"

Big Mom glanced at Gunetar, who nodded.

"I know how to reach his secret lab," I said. "You won't have to rely on him to keep you young. You can take all the tech you need."

Big Mom stared at me, trying to decide if I was lying, and she tickled her way into my head again. Desperate to keep her from the truth, I remembered how Handle hadn't been able to read my mind when I was angry. So I thought of Luck and our soon-to-be child, and how he or she would one day beg for heat and air. I thought of Handle, and the life-saving tech he hid below our feet. I thought of my brother, and how the Aurals had picked him merely to die. Anger burned me, and Big Mom staggered for a moment before the tickling stopped.

She looked at me, trying to decide what to do. She then motioned for Gunetar to cut my bonds.

As I stood up, I prayed to the Aurals my brother knew what he was doing when he set all this in motion. I also prayed that a little nobody like me, who had been manipulated by others all his life, could finally twist things to his own advantage.

By the time I walked out of the bub with Gunetar and Big Mom, the enforcers had beaten back the crowds. I saw Luck and several low kids, all with bloody faces, trying to break through the moms with their cudgels. But the moms were too tough. I yelled at Luck to pull back, but Gunetar told me to shut up. When I glanced back at Luck, she and the other low kids were gone.

Gunetar lead us to a supply room, where all of us – including Big Mom – donned fresh space suits. We then marched with twenty enforcers to the decay pit tunnel. The barricades lay where we'd built them, but a path had been shoved through them. I assumed when the moms had pulled back to stop the riot, the remaining low kids had fled the decay pit. As we passed the pit, Gunetar patted me on the shoulder and, mimicking Alna's voice, said he felt Omare.

Not yet you haven't, I thought. But you will.

None of these moms had ever hiked so far through the ice tunnels, and they flinched and jumped as our glow tubes lit the passing shapes in the ice. I wondered about the ancient swamps which had once grown on this world. Wondered if Omare was right and the Aurals had sent the world out of its orbit merely for humanity's use, or if there were other reasons we couldn't suspect. But in the end, it didn't matter what others did to you. It only mattered what you did for yourself.

"Is this the entrance to Handle's hideaway?" Big Mom asked, her right glove gripping my suit's shoulder as we entered the tunnel containing Omare's body. I muttered yes, praying Handle was watching us on his tech. Gunetar walked a dozen meters in

front of us with two of his scouts, and when he reached Omare's glowing body he stopped and slammed his gloved hand into the ice wall. I laughed. I knew Gunetar was screaming – screaming outrage in that sealed suit of his. Screaming that the person he'd hated more than any other had returned.

I hoped Handle remembered how much Gunetar hated Omare. If he remembered that, he'd know what was coming next. I also hoped the son of a bitch AI manipulator remembered all the Aural energy coursing through Omare's frozen veins.

When Big Mom and I reached Gunetar, his two scouts held him back from attacking the ice wall. Big Mom stared at Omare for moment, then grabbed my facemask and slammed me against the wall with a strength which shocked me. "What is this?" she asked. "What have you done?"

"It's not me," I stammered, hoping I seemed as afraid as I felt. "It's Handle. He recreated Omare's body. Said he'd reborn Omare. Said Omare would lead the low kids against you."

Big Mom pushed me away in disgust. She reached out for Gunetar, no doubt to tell him to cut my brother's body from the ice. But before she could touch Gunetar's space suit, the back of her suit exploded blood and quick-frozen air. She fell as I looked down the tunnel, where Handle was running toward us, his suit lighting up the tunnel and a strange rod in his hand shooting bolts of energy our way.

"Get away from him" Handle screamed, the strange weapon in his hand glowing hot as another mom's suit ripped to pieces. I didn't ask how Handle broadcast those words to my suit. And I didn't ask who Handle meant the enforcers to get away from – it was obvious he meant to stop the moms from cutting Omare from the ice.

Gunetar waved for his men to form a battle line. As they did, I shoved the mom who held my suit and ran for Handle. The rod in his hand pointed at me for a moment, then it moved to fire at a mom right behind me. "Damn you," Handle broadcast into my suit as I ran back to him, but I didn't care and I didn't stop until I was down the tunnel and passing through the imaginary wall. I kept running until I reached the drop off leading to Handle's lab.

I paused, afraid to jump because I didn't know if Handle had left on whatever tech slowed the fall at the bottom of the shaft. Glancing back, I saw the imaginary wall only worked one way. I watched Handle shooting the moms over and over with his weapon. Gunetar appeared unhurt, but the other moms spun and fell as their suits vented blood and air in colorful snow storms illuminated by Handle's spotlights. As Gunetar realized he had mere moments before Handle shot him, he lifted his cleaver and slammed it into the ice above Omare's body. The green foxfire coating Omare's body electrified the cleaver and Gunetar, who flailed and jumped like a low kid fed through the grinder. Handle turned to run back toward me, but the foxfire grabbed his body as it raced down the tunnel, the ice spurting to steam and shoved its way into a massive shock wave with only me blocking its escape.

I no longer cared if Handle left the tech in the shaft turned on. I flung myself into the falling darkness, and watched as the foxfire pushed up and up until I could see the open sky above and the rainbow tracers of Aurals circling and circling, almost as if they were writing words of encouragement for my eyes alone to read.

Don't ask for explanations. I have none.

As I'd hoped, the shaft again slowed my fall. As I landed, a blast of steam and debris pelted my suit, and I barely made it into the safety of the lab before a mountain of frozen air smashed into the doorway.

It took me two days to learn how to control enough of Handle's tech to clear the shaft, and another three days to return to the sky above. During that time I stared at the viewscreens in the shaft, wondering what it meant that where before only blackness could be seen I now saw a tiny dot of sky, which – strangely – appeared to be blue.

Once I could work the tech, I climbed into a strange flying machine, loaded up as much of Handle's tech as I could manage, then flew up the shaft. I wore a new space suit and was armed with one of Handle's projectile rods. When I cleared the shaft and the crater the foxfire had created, I circled above, shocked by what I saw. The mirror ash was gone. In its place the oxygen and nitrogen and all the other frozen gases sublimated into the sky, the rising clouds tinted a faint blue when backlit by the mother star's light.

I found no evidence of Big Mom, Handle, Gunetar, and the other enforcers who'd been in the tunnel.

Unable to see more than a few dozen meters due to the out-venting gas clouds, the flyer's tech guided me to the cave. When I was two kilometers away, the skies cleared and the mirror ash returned. I looked around. The Aurals had left a circle of frozen air around the cave, hopefully enough to survive on until the planet's atmosphere stabilized. The wall of clouds circling our little frozen world reminded me of Handle's shaft, and how you couldn't see much of anything when you looked up from inside that deep deep hole.

I landed beside the main airlock. As I cranked through the system, weapon ready, I imagined myself storming the caves and freeing my people. Instead, I stepped inside to the cheers of a hundred people, all lead by a laughing Luck, who stood there in an insulated jumpsuit.

"Took you forever," she said, before kissing my helmet.

After I removed my suit, Luck lead me to Big Mom's bub, where a green glowing image of Omare floated.

"It answers questions," Luck said. "Well, some. It's how we knew you came back."

I stared at the blank face of my brother. The green image looked like the holographs I'd seen spinning in Handle's lab. I wondered if anything of my brother existed before me, or if the Aurals had crafted tech in his image to make us feel comfortable about the changes this planet was undergoing.

"What happens now?" I asked Omare.

Omare turned its head slightly and stared at me with eyes glowing foxfire through blanket-empty pupils. "This planet is reborn and will soon orbit its star again. You live here, also reborn. No manipulating AIs can reach you now."

"And what about the Aurals? They manipulated us even more than the big moms."

Omare didn't answer, but its lips twitched into a cruel smirk.

"See," Luck said. "It's not the real Omare. Your brother never cruel."

"I know," I said. I started to turn away, but a question I'd wondered about since my brother's death popped into my head. "Is

this why you picked my brother?" I asked the glowing tech. "Is this all you wanted – to use him up until he died?"

For a moment the glowing Omare glared at me in what could only be described as irritation. Then it smirked again. "We didn't choose Omare."

"What do you mean? I was there. I saw you."

"We didn't choose Omare. We chose you. And you have done well."

I screamed and tried to hit Omare, all the anger I'd felt when others manipulated me slamming through my body. Luck and several low kids dragged me away as I yelled not to trust the Aurals. "They're no better than the big moms. Remember that. They're just the same!"

Luck and I snuggled in our little bub, feeling warm in our insulated jumpsuits and blankets. Over the last six months, Eur's surface temperature had risen by fifty degrees C. Our astronomers, in conversations with the Aural-projected Omare, said the planet would likely have a breathable atmosphere within twenty years. Things would still be extremely cold, but we wouldn't have to survive off frozen air anymore.

With Big Mom and Handle no longer manipulating us, and with there being no need to fear the use of technology, we'd already improved the lot of the entire cave. The shewanella bacteria now funneled their energy into lines feeding electrified heaters around the cave. While the low kids still lugged most of our air supply, the middle kids and moms were beginning to join in. Now that everyone knew there was no rebirth awaiting them – and that our expedition would stand or fall on its own efforts – people were more willing to do the hard, dangerous work of keeping us all alive.

There were still problems, still fights and anger over the way things had been and the way they'd go in the future. But now that we'd seen how powerful the Aurals were, and that we had to deal with them without the help of the rest of humanity and our AIs, people saw no alternative but to come together.

I don't know what will happen. It's obvious the Aurals wanted to trap us here. It's also obvious they're using this planet to change us. As Omare said, it takes a long time to change a culture. Humanity relied so much on tech and the AIs that when we first came to this world we wouldn't have survived without Big Mom and Handle watching over us. But we've changed over the centuries, and no longer need them. Now that they're gone, who knows what we'll become.

Not that this made the Aurals any better for what they'd done.

Luck moaned and rolled on her side. I placed my hand on her belly and felt our child kicking. Felt the tiny punches of infant outrage against everything holding him or her back from our enticing world.

I smiled and kissed Luck on her cheek.

Even though the air canister's tick-tock clock hadn't chimed, I reached up and released a burst of fresh air.

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Jason Sanford published two stories last year in *Interzone* – one won the 2008 Readers' Poll and the other was reprinted in *Year's Best SF 14*. He's also published his fiction in *Analog*, *Intergalactic Medicine Show*, *The Mississippi Review*, *Diagram*, and other places. Two more of his stories will be published in upcoming issues of *Interzone*. His website is [jasonsanford.com](http://jasonsanford.com).



# NO LONGER YOU

KATHERINE SPARROW & RACHEL SWIRSKY

**I**t's the human condition to fight mortality," Aviva told me, before I knew how true that was, before I even knew I was part of the fight.

I shouldn't start there, Aviva says. She says to start at the beginning. She says people recognize beginnings.

My beginning with Aviva was also my ending with another girl. Becca.

She didn't talk as she packed her things: dance shoes, CDs, extra leotards, the slim cigarettes she always smoked. She'd left two weeks before, after dropping me a Dear John without waiting around to box up her possessions. My stuff was already in boxes since I couldn't afford rent without her.

"I still love you," I said.

Becca rested the crate on her hip, dancer's posture immaculate. She wore a kerchief over her honey-blonde hair and concealed her lithe body with sweats. She was so over me it hurt.

"I know, Simon." Her voice was rough and tired. Her gaze flickered to the window overlooking the street where her new boyfriend waited in a pick-up, muscular hands gripping the steering wheel. "I'll be back tomorrow around eleven for the rest. Do us both a favor. Don't be here."

I leaned toward her. Her smell: aged sandalwood, a hint of sweat. "Are you going back to his place? Are you moving in with him?"

"If it's any of your business, I'm moving in with my parents."

The smell of the pick-up's exhaust drifted through the open window. I had to see that guy, who she thought was better than me.

I tried to grab her box. She pulled it away. "What are you doing?"

"It's heavy. Let me take it out."

"I can get it."

"Don't be proud, Becca. Let a guy do you a favor."

She had a better grip, but I was stronger. The box crashed between us, CD cases shattering over hardwood. Becca shook her head.

"I can't believe you just did that."

Broken CDs glinted. I was passion's fool. Like all the roles I'd ever danced who spun madly toward their climaxes, ready to die or kill for their beloved.

"I'm sorry, Becca," I began.

She backed away. "You're ridiculous, you know that? I'll send Greg tomorrow."

I started to follow her out the door, but this wasn't ballet. I couldn't win her back with *battements* and *grand jétes*.

I can't describe how it was. Not completely. Memory shifts constantly. That's what Aviva says. Everyone transforms their pasts through the sheer act of trying to remember. We select some details. We discard others. We combine the shreds with elements pulled from television, books, other memories, our imaginations. We stitch everything together so quickly that we don't even know we're creating something. Our patchwork of half-truths and remembered lies feels more real than reality.

That's why existence appears fragmented, Aviva says. She says

the world only seems like it consists of a billion relativistic perspectives because social sciences don't measure the world at all. They measure misconceptions about the past.

Aviva asked me to write down my story, and so I am. But my memories of the time before are like recalling a visit to a foreign land where everyone spoke another language. Translation transforms everything.

After Becca left, I slumped in the doorway, staring after the pick-up.

Across the way, the college co-op was hosting a party. Kids spilled across the lawn in front of their Victorian with its half-collapsed porch, the surrounding trees laced with hammocks and reeking of pot.

"Come over!" shouted a topless boy with a Solo cup. "There's plenty on tap!"

What the hell, I figured, better to drink on their dime. I pocketed a pack of Becca's cigarettes and headed over.

Of course once I was there, it was a chorus of "Where's Becca headed?" and "Aw, man, I'm sorry." Tipsy vegan freshgirls made clumsy passes – but no thanks, I'm not into robbing the patchouli-scented cradle.

Eventually, the kids drank enough Pabst to forget me. I took my plastic cup of vodka to the herb garden to get drunk in relative privacy.

Like my mood, the weather grumbled on the edge of storm. Cloudy dusk vivified the garden's colors: green chive spears, star-shaped white anise blooms, emerald clusters of woodruff and lovage. I flopped onto a scavenged lawn chair and pulled out the pack.

Becca's cigarettes were frivolous and feminine, so long and thin they burned up in a heartbeat. I was on my third before I even tasted smoke. I intended to smoke every one – to symbolically light Becca up, draw her in, and breathe her out like toxic waste.

I'd have spent the night doing just that if not for Aviva. At first, I barely noticed her: an average looking Jewish girl, pretty in a wind-scrubbed, bike-riding, Rabbi's-daughter-turned-activist kind of way. She wore a red kerchief over frizzy hair, along with patched jeans and a fraying sweater. Wide, hazel eyes stood out against pale, freckle-spattered skin.

Even as she stood in place, looking up at the moon, she remained in motion, toes sketching circles in the moist soil. Her gaze swept toward the Olympic Mountains that loomed in twilight shades over the fence, then down at the distant pines, and finally toward me. She trudged over, hand extended like a panhandler's.

"Cigarette?"

I clutched the pack, defensive of my symbolic Beccas.

Aviva offered her plastic cup. "Yours looks empty. Trade you."

I exhaled a disappointing lungful. Shrugging, I reached out. The fingers that brushed mine were short and plump, nails ragged.

On impulse, I tossed her the pack. "Take them. They're crap anyway."

She caught it in midair. "So's the gin, so we're even." She lit

one up and dragged like she needed it. "I'm trying to quit. It never works. I had a majority once, but the smell..." She ashed near a tomato plant, and squinted at my face. "You're Simon Czarnecki, aren't you? I saw you dance once. In Cincinnati. You were Puck."

I blinked. Puck. That had been one of my first productions, all sequins and sparkle. "You had bad luck. I was the understudy."

"It was the middle of the week. The other dancers looked like they wanted to go home, but you danced like you were on fire from the footlights."

I shrugged. "I didn't get to do it every night."

"It was in the papers. Another company hired you into a leading role afterward, didn't they? The critic predicted you were on, what did he say, a 'meteoric rise'?"

Meteoric rise. Yeah, those had been the days. "That was before I hurt my ankle." I gulped bad gin. "Look, I kinda came out here to be alone."

"Why come at all then?" Aviva settled cross-legged in the dirt. I glared. She ignored me. "I'm Aviva Gonon. Moved back to Seattle a few months ago."

She offered her hand. Reluctantly, I shook.

"Grew up here?" I asked.

She shook her head. "I move around a lot."

"I live across the street. Or I used to."

"Across the street? With the moving van?"

"I can't afford rent on my own."

"Girlfriend dump you?"

I raised my cup. "Rebecca Roth. Love of my life."

Aviva cocked her head. "You don't look dead to me."

The glass door slid open. Topless girls emerged, laughing as they compared their biceps. A long-haired Trotskyist set up speakers. Guitar chords twanged.

*When love comes, you'll no longer be you...be you...be me...*

"I like this song," said Aviva. "Do you?"

It had been one of Becca's favorites. "It's sentimental."

A musical sting drowned me out. "What?" she shouted.

"Sentimental!"

"Whatever."

Aviva raised her arms and began to dance, movements sloppy and sensual. Her breasts moved freely under her sweater. I found myself reassessing her: messy, uninhibited, so unlike Becca. Music pulsed, *be you, be you, be me.*

Aviva caught me looking and smiled.

"Let's get another drink."

All I ever had was the luck of the genetic draw. Long limbs, sleek muscles – and grace, that ineffable quality that convinced people I was more than I appeared.

After my injury, I didn't know what to do. No one was sure what would happen. I might continue my "meteoric rise." I might never dance professionally again.

UCLA offered me a scholarship. I didn't know what else to do.

Then, in Dance History: Rebecca Roth. A Junior, intelligent and organized. Her parents were Orthodox and mine lapsed Reform, but it gave us a reason to chat after class. We spent Friday nights in her dorm room, "celebrating Shabbat."

Becca didn't have the body for ballet so she danced modern. She was decent, but lacked greatness, and she knew it.

She was beautiful, though, a striking old-fashioned beauty with too many curves for *Giselle* even when she tried starving them away. She had bold features – after plastic surgery to reduce what she called her beak – eyes like a silent movie star's, and silken hair that perpetually tumbled out of the ribbon she used to bind it at her nape.

Becca wanted to transform dance. She had enough money, from an inheritance, to open a small studio in Seattle with me as her lead. She believed my injury would be the making of me. "You don't want to be an ordinary dancer, toasted for a season and forgotten. A talent like yours should change everything."

Wed fuck, and afterward she'd lay her head on my chest and look up at me, dark eyes a swirl of admiration. I knew her fantasies: she imagined us dancing together, her own curvaceous body decked in white silk and tulle, toes pinched to numbness, turn-out achingly perfect. And me beside her, leaping, spinning, my performance effortlessly and inevitably superior to hers.

Some girls like the pain of basking. It reinforces their dreams about what art is. Genius is supposed to burn. It's all-consuming, incandescent. They want to lie beside it, run their fingers across its cheek and gaze into its restless eyes. They want to reassure themselves that genius needs them.

"Relationships between people with lone bodies and lone minds are always unequal." That's what Aviva says. "Power springs up between them like a weed, and tangles everything."

Aviva says people only experience radical changes after a crisis. I could have taken drugs. I could have attempted a comeback to professional dance. I could have put a bullet into Becca's heart, and then swallowed the pistol.

Instead, I found Aviva.

She could have taken me that night. I'd have been eager for her, even when her touch became pain – but Aviva waited. Aviva always waits for us to understand.

The morning after: Light and sound were my enemies. I buried my head in my pillow.

Aviva's laughter decayed into a smoker's cough. "Coffee?"

I cracked my eyes open. We were in my bedroom, my possessions sorted into boxes: kitchen detritus, posters, programs from old productions. Aviva sat on the edge of my bed wearing one of my tank tops. She was in no hurry to cover up, revealing just enough chubby to get lost in.

I reached for the cup and took a long, dark drink. "We got really drunk. What happened? Was I an ass?"

"If you were, I wouldn't be here."

She leaned over to take back the cup. My tank top cut low across her cleavage, revealing a tattoo.

"What's that?" I asked.

She angled to give me a better look. "I got it in South America."

A monkey perched on her collar bone, sitting astride an anaconda coiled in the shape of an infinity sign. The monkey was trying to strangle the snake, and the snake was trying to bite the monkey.

"It's the human condition to fight mortality," she said, pointing to the monkey.

My eyes lingered on the shadow between her breasts. I felt a tickle of intrigue followed by a memory of Becca's sleek shoulders. I slumped onto my pillow. "Becca had a tattoo on her back.

It was a mountain lion."

"Mmm," said Aviva, sipping.

"I bought it for our anniversary last year. She said it was her favorite present ever. I told her it was really for me. I'd always wanted to do it with two dicks."

As I write that, Aviva ripples with amusement. "Pussies," she corrects. "The joke only works with pussies."

"With two pussies. Becca smacked me."

Aviva barked a laugh like any guy. Then her expression changed to fright: her pupils widening, her mouth pulling into a grimace. "That's fucked up," she said quietly. "I'd hit you, too."

"Yeah, stupid," I muttered. "Maybe that's why she left me."

After breakfast, we went walking. The day was bright with cool breezes blowing from Canada. We ambled along shaded sidewalks, watching college students toss Frisbees across dry lawns. A Korean woman in a shaded hat cut across our path, each hand weighed down with a bucket of fish.

"Would you give me your opinion on something?" Aviva asked. "As a dancer."

"Sure. If I can."

"Okay. So, some arts are enduring. Like painting. You put paint on canvas and it stays there. In a hundred years, people can see it. But ballet – you dance, and it's gone. Time burns it up."

I shrugged. "I guess so."

"Doesn't it bother you that your work disappears?"

"I never really thought about it."

"What would you give to make it endure?"

"You mean like put it on video?"

Aviva sighed. "That's the problem, isn't it? When you tape ballet, it changes. Dancers and audience can't interact. The camera interferes." She shook her head. "You can't preserve things without changing them. At least a little."

She paused. I had nothing to say. She spoke again after a moment.

"You're a Jew, right?"

"Well, Jew-ish. My parents were Reform. I'm more American Disaffected."

"My parents were concerned about how many Jews are giving up the religion."

"I guess everything has to go sometime."

Aviva tensed. "You shouldn't say that! Culture matters. When a people disappear, what they have to offer is lost forever."

"Hey, I'm not in favor of genocide, but not everyone wants to go to shul."

"Then why date a Jewish girl?"

"Becca? We just went to school together."

"You don't feel drawn toward people who share your culture?"

She was leading me toward something. I knew it, and I didn't appreciate it. "I don't know. Maybe. But even if I do, that's my choice. People have to be free to choose."

"Do you think we're free now? Any of us? Every day, something unique is gone forever. Languages, ancient knowledge, oral histories. Every day."

"So what are you going to do about it?"

Aviva looked achingly sincere. "Everything I can."

We walked in silence until we reached the park. Aviva pointed

to a pair of running children. The taller, an Asian girl with a pixie cut, flew an eagle-shaped kite with red feathers.

Aviva grinned. All the anger and determination had vanished from her face, leaving only enjoyment. "If I could be anything else in the world, I'd be a bird. What about you?"

"Rebecca Roth's boyfriend."

Aviva searched my face. "If you want, you never have to go through that again. Heartbreak isn't necessary."

"I don't want to live like a monk."

"Of course not."

"Are you proposing to me?"

"This is called getting to know each other," she said. "I never rush into a melding."

"A what?"

She pulled away. I felt suddenly bereft. I hadn't realized how close she'd been, how intense. For a moment, she stood completely still. Then, she opened her eyes.

Aviva no longer looked out. Instead, I saw a scared woman, legs tensed for flight, eyes round and haunted. I'd seen her before, during that moment in my bedroom. As quickly as I recognized her, she vanished into the features of someone much older, his eyes narrowed, his hands shaking.

Aviva's face and body transformed a hundred times. Her posture changed to make her seem tall or short, narrow or heavy. Innumerable entities examined me through her hazel eyes.

I felt excited, frightened, disbelieving. "What are you?"

"I think you have some idea."

And then she kissed me. I can't remember how it felt – not viscerally, as if I still had skin – but I remember wanting more.

"Call if you want," she said, slipping her number into my pocket and walking away, still wearing my shirt.

Aviva always kisses people she wants, in case they don't want her back. Her kiss echoed in me like music yearning for choreography. It's like that for everyone.

Over the next days, I thought about Aviva constantly. I set up the computer in my new place, closed the blinds, and skimmed websites, picking up scattered hints. The trail led me to role-play chat rooms where lonely people pretended to be victims.

*I enter you through every orifice.*

*"No!" I try to pull away, but you're too strong.*

*Your body and being yearn toward me. You are MINE.*

*I am nothing without you. I am yours. Forever.*

And that was the good stuff.

I approached role-players after their games. Most slammed up privacy ware when they realized I wasn't playing. The true believers spilled their theories in nervous bursts. The *Tomid* were out there, somewhere, evading detection as they consumed bored housewives and the homeless.

I assembled scraps of verifiable evidence from the detritus. They – whatever they were – called themselves the *Tomid*, which meant *always* in Hebrew. They'd begun in an Israeli settlement on a kibbutz founded by radicals who feared cultural extinction. Seventy-five women were impregnated with genetically altered zygotes.

The founder, Rabbi Zacharias, was a zealot who railed against the dispersion of the chosen people. He talked about apathy and conversion as if they were genocidal weapons. He'd have hated

me. I disliked him, too; his photograph from the Israeli news looked like my hard-ass Yeshiva teacher. I wondered which out-of-focus toddler in the background might be Aviva.

Patchy military records suggested that the kibbutz had been bombed not long after the *Tomid* were born. The Israeli government claimed it was collateral damage from a skirmish with Palestine, but historical notes suggested the regime wasn't keen on genetically modified Jews.

After that, the *Tomid* hopped the fence into urban legend. Skeptics called them vampire derivatives, or Freudian projections. Conspiracy theorists said they were part alien. Slang proliferated: soul factories, hive minds, Jew-eaters. I shouldn't have believed any of it, but I'd seen her.

I called.

"Why me?" I asked. "I didn't even have a Bar Mitzvah."

"It's not just about Jews. A lot of people need saving." She paused. "It's nice, though, to take a Jew sometimes. Even one who's, what did you call it? American Disaffected?"

"Did you follow me from Cincinnati?"

She laughed. "Do you know how many places I've been since then? But maybe...maybe I did decide when I saw you on stage. I want you, Simon."

Before I could talk myself out of it, I blurted, "I want you, too," and hung up.

Aviva asked me to her house. She came to the door in a beat-up T-shirt and jeans, holding a wooden cooking spoon. "Come in. Why don't you give yourself the tour while I prep dinner?"

I made my way through her narrow rooms, crowded by brightly colored, hand-made furniture. Projects cluttered every surface: jury-rigged computers, soapstone figurines, shelves of untidy manuscripts. Someone was hand-sewing glass beads to a red *tallit* which reminded me of the one my mother wore over her dress every Friday, even after she stopped going to *shul*.

"Who's the weaver?" I asked, picking up a skein of purple yarn.

"Flora Guitierrez," Aviva called from the kitchen. The scent of garlic and butter flowed down the hall. "She was from a small town in Mexico."

"Can I talk to her?"

"It's not like that."

"Then what's it like?"

"What's it like being only one person?"

"You don't know?"

I walked toward Aviva. Her kitchen was as narrow and cramped as the other rooms, hung with a profusion of spices and cooking pans. Potted plants crammed the windowsill, hungry for sunlight.

Aviva scattered a handful of onions into the frying pan, sending up sizzle and scent. "I grew up with other kids like me. The members of our community who were old, sick, or just curious joined with us before we could remember anything."

"Even when you were a baby?"

"My mother is part of me. She helped me learn to crawl from the inside."

I tried to imagine having my mother inside my head, and decided I didn't want to jump down that rabbit hole. "What happened to the other kids?"

Aviva's periodic sadness returned, hardening the edges of her mouth. "I've searched for my siblings, but if they're alive, they're hiding too well. Ironic, isn't it? I can save any culture but my own."

"But you have to know what it's like. You've got people inside you who remember being...solo."

"I feel them beneath me like an ocean. Emotions and thoughts float up as driftwood. I remember what they remember and know what they know, but I'm not them. I'm me."

"Who are you, then?" I pressed. "Are you all those people mixed up in a blender?"

"Not really," she said. "I feel like I've wintered in Christchurch and survived being shot in the face, but that doesn't make me into a mix of Evrard and Abhay." She stirred the browning onions. "My personality is on the surface. I'm the one in control."

I grinned. "Except when the rest of us complain about our mothers controlling our lives, we're exaggerating."

"I can't reach her anymore," said Aviva, wistfully. "She dived to the bottom of our consciousness a long time ago. We can't feel her ripples."

"Ripples? What are you talking about?"

"It's...the way it feels. Like water, rippling. That's the metaphor most of us decided on."

"But I want to talk to them, not just to you."

"You want them to say you're making the right decision. Only you can make that choice."

Another pot started boiling. Aviva added pasta, sending up plumes of steam. I didn't just want to know if it was the right decision. I craved knowledge of her, like a sixteen year old wanting to understand sex. It was a bottomless, insatiable desire.

"What do you want more than anything else?" asked Aviva.

"Becca," I said automatically.

"Not some girl who left you."

"You."

Aviva rolled her eyes.

"I don't know. To be famous? To be a great dancer again?"

"Reach deeper."

"I want to know things matter. I want to be part of something."

Aviva smiled. "All right, Simon. I can give you that."

I stepped toward her, sliding my hands across her skin. Her breasts were soft beneath thin cotton. Goosebumps prickled my arms.

"It's complicated," Aviva ruminated. "Dancers are of the body, of the moment. Maybe you're not the sort of person I should take. Maybe we're opposites, you and I."

"I don't know if I want you to take me," I said, "but I know I - I want you."

"Well. There's always the old-fashioned way."

Aviva led me to her futon.

People say sex is the fusion of two people, but it's not. It's a lesser carnal act. I tried to stay deep inside her, imagining what it would be like to never pull out – but inevitably, we became two separate people again.

She could have taken me then. Maybe she should have. Aviva is more important than any of us. She should have whoever she wants.

In the morning, I went to Becca's studio. She was alone, practicing a new sequence. She leapt across the stage, hands and feet a flurry of graceful motion.

I waited until she was finished. "You need to work on your extension," I said quietly.

Becca startled. She looked down, her eyes hardening. "Why are you here, Simon?"

I'd had a lot of fantasies about confronting her. They seemed petty now.

"I'm thinking of giving up dance," I said.

She frowned at first as if she didn't believe me. When I didn't take it back, she leapt down from the stage. "Simon! No! You can't do that." She came close, inundating me with the scent of her perfume. "Is it because of me? Because I broke up with you?"

"No, it's not."

She continued, "Because our relationship was all tangled with the dancing. For me, too. I still feel weird when I'm practicing, thinking of you."

"That's not it, Becca."

"Then why?"

Becca stood, without thinking, in second position. Her dance training was part of her body, like her flesh. I'd been part of that world for so long that it felt strange to realize she was someplace different from me, someplace I wasn't sure I wanted to go back to.

"Becca," I said, "Is my ankle getting better? Am I going to be what I was?"

Becca looked trapped. I caught the shake of her head that belied what she really thought, even as she started to say, "Maybe in another year or two..."

Strangely, it was a relief. All the tension in my life had been moving toward one thing. Now I knew. It would never happen.

"Thanks, Becca," I said, turning to go.

She ran up behind me. "Simon, please, I want you to know... Even if you'll never be technically perfect again, there's something you give off. An energy that reaches people's souls. It reached mine. The world would be losing something if you stopped dancing."

I gave her a faint smile. "Thanks, Becca. I'll think about it."

I scarcely remember what it was like to dance. How could something as basic as moving through physical space become an art? I remember abstractions, but the sense is forever gone.

I brought Aviva to the practice room where Becca and I had danced until our bodies ached and our feet bled. Becca had pressed the keys into my hand before I left. She said if I gave myself fully to dancing one more time I'd never be able to let it go.

Aviva came to the studio wrapped in the red *tallit*, hand-sewn glass beads shimmering around her. Mirrors all around us reflected our bodies from different perspectives so that we seemed to be a dozen different people. The windows set in the western wall showed a sunset of scarlet and aubergine.

I danced for Aviva.

There's a space where your mind goes while you dance. Words disappear. Your body calculates trajectories more quickly than

you could think of the steps. Your senses fill with the heat of exertion, and the ache of your muscles, and the elation of movement.

I abandoned my choreography and danced raw, primal emotion, only half-aware I was emulating Becca's modern dance. I hurtled toward Aviva, and then away from her. My fingers stretched out while I arched away, yearning and afraid. I danced seeking, and trembling, and desire.

*When love comes, you'll no longer be you...be you...be me...*

I crumbled to my knees, head in my hands. My muscles throbbed. My heart pounded.

Aviva's hands slid along my shoulders, cool and tingling. She pressed her lips against my ear, "Maybe I shouldn't take you. Maybe I should keep you to dance for me."

I lifted my face toward her and we bit at each other's mouths, trying to devour ourselves. We made love on the *tallit*, frantic and carnal. It was only a fraction of what I wanted.

Afterward, she murmured, "I have a confession."

I glanced at her, waiting.

"It wasn't a coincidence I found you. When I reached Seattle, I saw posters for your performances. I remembered you. I wanted you. Some of my anarchist friends had seen you at co-op parties. I waited for my chance." She tangled her fingers in mine. "You're irresistible to me. You're a craving, like cigarettes. I want to know what it's like to embody the moment."

She laid her head on my chest. I ran my fingers through her coarse, frizzy hair.

"Are you mad?" she asked.

"How could I be mad that you chose me?"

We went outside so Aviva could smoke. It was dark by then, her embers glowing.

"You should lay off those," I said. "It's not just your life."

"You try ignoring a thousand people's cravings."

I held out my hand. I'd smoked Becca's; now I wanted to know what it would be like to inhale Aviva. "Give me one."

She pulled out a spare. "See? They're good."

"Well, I may not be using this body much longer."

She grinned. "Tease."

She offered her lighter. I took a long, satisfying drag.

"I shouldn't tell you this," she said, "I should let you think you'll be immortal. I'm supposed to pass myself to my children when this body wears out. But so far, I haven't gotten pregnant. Maybe it's the cigarettes."

"You're still young."

"I look young. I've had a lot of miscarriages."

"For you, being pregnant must be..."

"Confusing?" She laughed, exhaling smoke. "It is, but not how you mean. I didn't share thoughts with the fetuses. They were lost too soon. The closest I've been to being a mother was when I took two dying African babies. Their throats had been slashed. They weren't old enough to say yes or no, but when I pulled them toward me, they came."

"You can't take people too often," I mused. "What about the bodies?"

"People tell me what to do once they're in me. They know who to call, what to say." She stopped near a streetlight to put out her cigarette. "Two million died in the genocide when I took the babies. I could have taken them all if I'd had time. I think about

the lives I couldn't save and it feels like...loneliness? Maybe. I don't completely understand that word."

She drew the *tallit* tighter. Her gaze was remote, unrelenting grief etched on her face.

In a moment, her sadness evaporated into joy. I was confused then about how her mood could change so quickly and completely. Now I know: she carries joy beneath her in a thousand different minds.

I said, "From the way you talk, it sounds like you want to take everyone."

She smiled up at me. "Why not?"

Inside Aviva, we live as if submerged in a vast ocean. Aviva surrounds us. She is the water; she is the tide; she is the salt and the sand.

Water is the metaphor we choose, so that we can make sense of our new existence in terms of the old. Someday we will evolve beyond our physical body's language. For now, we approximate.

Other people wash over and through me. I remember their pasts. I feel their emotions. I must concentrate to keep myself intact and discrete. Aviva is the most distinct of us since she still has a body.

Time passes here at the speed of perception. We think of ourselves as colorful streaks, like fish, flitting through Aviva's shoals. Some choose to dive more deeply into the vast ocean beneath us. Their thoughts become more and more diffuse until they become part of our communal subconscious.

Their memories rise into us from time to time – images of date trees in Israel, or blood seeping across asphalt – but their individuality is gone. Flora Guitterez believes we'll all be like that someday. We'll flow into one another, free of boundaries, becoming something that's all of us and none of us. We are not ready to do that yet. I don't know if I'll ever be.

Only the African babies – who never grew into lone minds and bodies – are true natives. They swim rapidly and gracefully. Sometimes they dive deep and dissolve, only to condense themselves into tight pinpricks of energy, more focused than any of us, that leap upward into Aviva's consciousness. They communicate through jets of fragmentary emotion that we cannot quite decipher.

"You can't preserve things without changing them." That's what Aviva says.

We are pregnant. We've passed the three month mark where we always miscarried. We've even quit smoking. Excitement beams through us like sunlight penetrating water. Now that Aviva's body has proven capable of sustaining pregnancy, we imagine she'll have many, many children. When we're very old, we'll give ourselves to one of them, and join their world. It will be beautiful.

Aviva thinks of little else, her mind incandescent with expectation. Someday we'll show ourselves without fear of governments or persecution. There will be a nation of us. That most precious thing, human consciousness, will never be wasted again.

We want a record of what it's like now, at this new beginning. We're all writing down our stories. I'm first because I ignited this possibility. My body was the father, but we are all parents to this child, a thousand worrying mothers studying Aviva's every

bout of nausea like an augury. This fetus, this dream of a child our body labors to make real, is an exquisite mystery.

Flora Guitterez wants to write about her time with the revolutionaries. Polly Chiang wants to tell how Aviva came upon her in a canyon with her throat slit and, after taking her, returned to the city and terrified Polly's would-be murderer with tales seemingly from beyond the grave.

I can think of no better record to leave for you than the story of how I chose this life.

As you prepare to enter the *Tomid*, I urge you to examine your life. Whatever you think you are, you do not understand yourself. If you are strong, the *Tomid* will humble you. If you are brilliant, the *Tomid* will teach you that intelligence is a means, not an end. You must be willing to leave yourself behind before you can truly discover who you are.

Aviva knew my decision before I told her. She's played out this scene many times before.

She took my hand as we stood beneath the streetlight, the smell of sex still on our bodies from the studio. "We're already prepared to go," she said. "We've scattered our art around the city, to give people a little joy when they find them."

"Where will we go?" I asked.

She smiled at the plural pronoun. "Williamsburg, in Brooklyn. I want to take a few Hasidic women."

Her eyes shone with an arousal I'd never seen before, not even when she came beneath me, my fingers inside her. She smelled of all the best of Seattle, rain and green and mountains.

She ran her hands along my body, awakening sensation in my chest, shoulders, wrists, fingertips. I savored the feelings for the last time. It was like foreplay. It was foreplay.

"I can stop now," she said, breathing heavily. "If I go any further, I can't."

The yellow streetlight highlighted her tattoo: a weak, lonely monkey battling the serpent of infinity. I brushed it with my fingers. "We'll win."

Aviva wrapped me in the *tallit*, and kissed my eyes closed.

We stood together on a precipice, and then we plunged down.

She invaded me. I tried to scream. I had no voice. Half inside her and half inside myself, I writhed in a body no longer mine, my mind consumed with agony.

Aviva says absorption shouldn't be painful, but it is. Even the earliest ones who merged with her in Israel agree. Our minds scream with the desire to retain physical flesh.

And then it was over. She flowed around me, an endless enveloping tide. Forever and finally, I entered her.

Katherine Sparrow lives in Santa Cruz, California with a bunch of surfers and hippies, though she is neither. She has recently published stories in *Fantasy Magazine*, *Nightshade Press*, and *Podcastle* about an alchemist, poly-anarcho-pirates, and a suburban mom taking flight, respectively. She blogs at [ktsparrow.livejournal.com](http://ktsparrow.livejournal.com).

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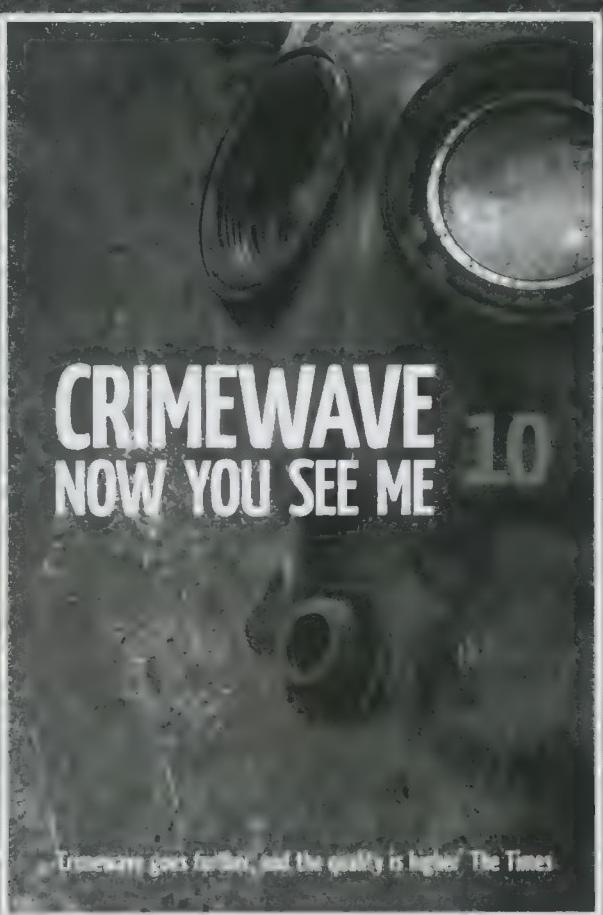
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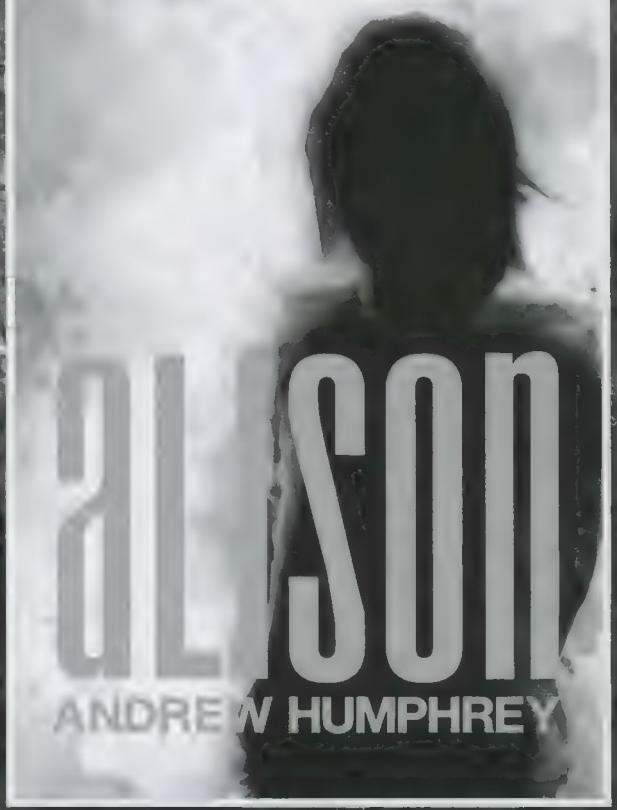
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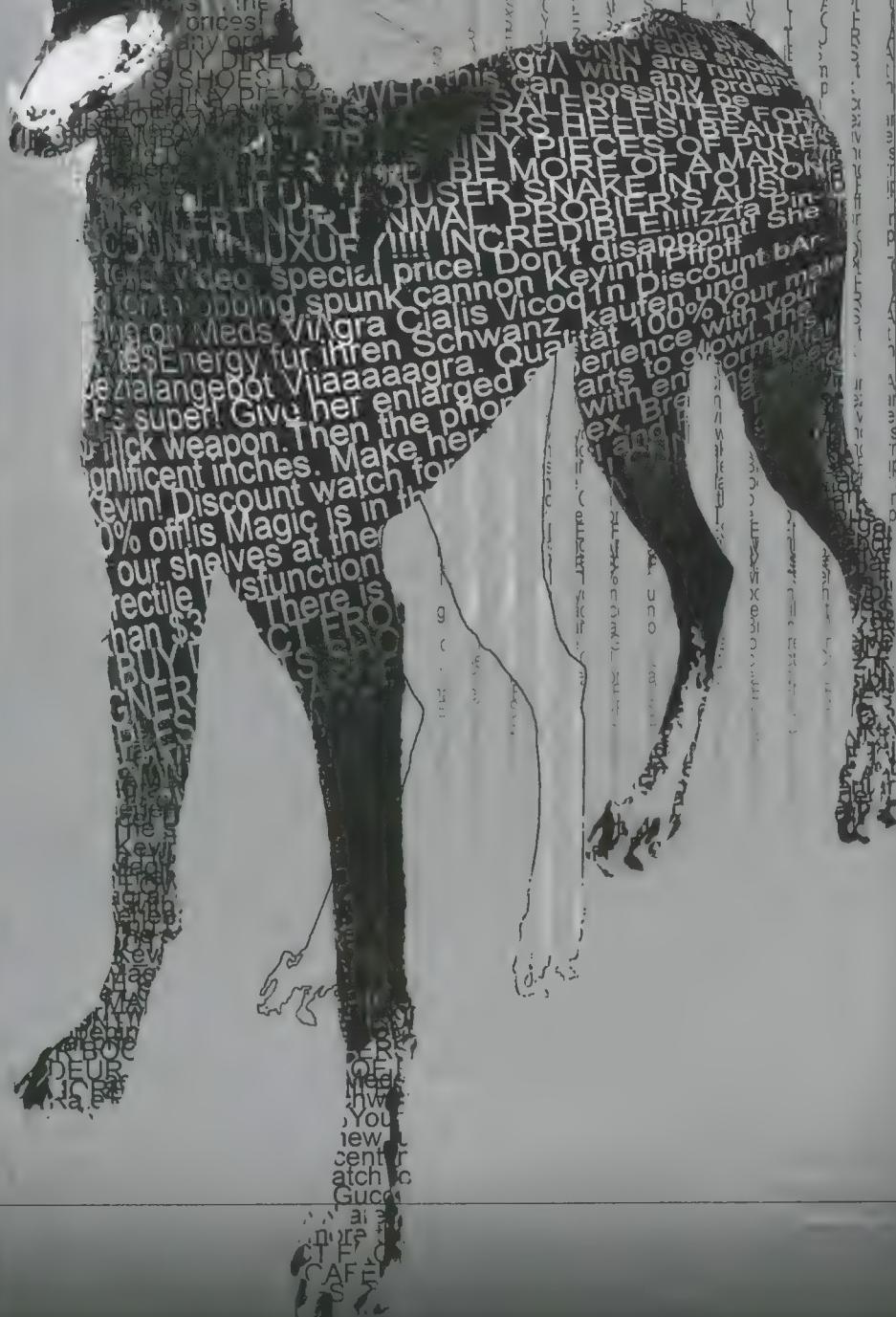
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# A HOWLING COMES

He feels rather than hears it, an axonic tide flooding his nervous system, primal and terrifying, overwhelming each neuron in turn. Hairs pull taut in follicles, muscular movement freezes, his heart-rate jumps. His preconscious brain sparks and prickles with images of predators, prepares for flight. He thinks he sees a canine form – half thinks he half sees it – an antimatter mastiff, a shadow hound, maw agape, stretching its voice over empty distance.

The howling ceases. He blinks, looks up at his desk, breathes out slowly. *Must've dozed off for a second. Must've dozed off.* The consoles on-screen in front of him glitch and tic, polling remote systems they can no longer see. A network activity graph plots a lengthening flatline, the rough plateau of normal traffic scrolling left out of view, six seconds in the past. Seven. Eight. He blinks again, uncomprehending, and sees the line leap back up the y axis, the bitstream restored. Data surges into blank consoles as connections are renewed.

*What the hell was that?*

It's still dark. The streetlamps in front of the building spill yellow light through a glazed curtain wall. Two hundred desks encumbered with monitors, keyboards, books, cables, toys, cereal packets and other geekish bric-a-brac cast complex shadows in the darkened room. There is no one here but Kevin.

He blinks again. Looks at the inscrutable array of red LEDs that form the face of a novelty clock on his desk, a freebie from the Intellectual Property Department for one of his patent proposals. Above the LEDs it is embossed with the company logo, a stylised silver blob bullet-pointing the resolutely lower-case and sans-serif noun *brightnode*. Below this is one of the company's identikit caps-free straplines: *keeping your world junk-free*. Kevin's brain crunches through the clock's six binary-coded digits: zero, two, four, two and four, one, one and two. Nearly three o'clock, which means he has five hours before the desks around him begin filling up again. It also means seven pm PST so people are certainly still working in the Palo Alto office. With any luck they'll be too engrossed in their own projects to pay any attention to Kevin.

He sits and watches in case there is another glitch, but the test data keep coming in. After a minute the flatline has tracked left off-screen and he gets up and makes for the kitchen. He clanks onto the narrow aluminium bridge spanning the building's atrium and peers down through a ground-floor glass wall to the reception desk, where the contract security guy sits in a halo of light reading *Nuts* magazine and drinking strong tea from a blue plastic flask. Kevin waves, but the concentration of the distant reader is too strong to break. He steps off the bridge into the kitchen area and removes a cup from the stack on top of the espresso machine. He has left this black hunkered beast steaming all night, pressured up like an ancient shunting engine on standby in a goods yard. At approximate hourly intervals he has stepped across the gantry and pumped out three shots of coffee to be knocked back with the contents of two flat tubes of brown sugar. He hasn't eaten since breakfast.

The machine is an absurdly over-automated model which compiles weekly spreadsheets of its own usage patterns and will e-mail a service agent when it needs maintenance. It is designed to make the productivity-enhancing benefits of pressure-extracted caffeine available to the kind of employees you wouldn't trust with a box of matches, but are nevertheless obliged to indulge. Everything about it has been engineered to rule out scalds, burns, minor explosions and, above all, litigation. All hazardous surfaces are concealed behind a sleek cool-wall fascia and interaction with the machine is confined to a panel of six buttons and a four-line LCD display. Kevin's brain registers motion on the tiny screen, but he's too preoccupied to read the single phrase that scrolls round in a continuous loop.

10 good reasons being longer. Threesomes? Foursomes? No problem with your new jumbo size anaconda.

He slides his cup onto the drip tray and pushes the shot button. Nothing happens. He looks back up at the screen to see the text glitch. As he crouches to peer at the dispensing nozzle another message begins scrolling round above his head.

ss No test, No class neccesssary, buy yourself Batchelor/Masteer MBA/Doctoraate diplomas Valid in all countries hyrhp otjiz eh

Still squatting by the machine he reaches up and prods the shot button again with his thumb. Nothing, but another message rolls past above him.

These exclusive copies of glorious timepieces were performed by real top-sawyers!! Spacious presents for your loved people!

Kevin coughs. This really isn't the time for the machine to start acting up. He stands and yanks out the Ethernet cable that connects the machine to the outside world, holds in the cancel button for five seconds until the backlight blinks and the display shows four lines of pixelated blocks. He releases his finger and the machine flashes up its usual *Ready* message followed by *Restore network connection*. Kevin ignores this injunction, and this time the shot button yields a comforting whine and rattle as a measure of beans tumbles from the hopper at the side of the machine into an unseen grinder. There is a whoosh as the water is pumped through the grounds and a pool of brown sludge accumulates in the waiting cup beneath what, to a critical eye, is a somewhat inadequate *crema*. Kevin clicks the shot button twice more and removes the cup to a table where the sugar is kept. Instead of the usual company logo, the side of the cup is decorated with Chinese characters. 超快速幫您解決資金問題!!

Kevin decapitates a pair of sachets, stirs in their contents and downs the resulting goo in one gulp. As the last of the treacly bitterness dwindles on the back of his tongue, there is a sudden growl behind him. He whirls round, spilling coffee dregs onto his shoes before he can identify the origin of the noise. On the wall near the entrance is a phone extension he has never noticed before. A red light blinks on the keypad to indicate an incoming call, but something must be wrong with the speaker. Instead of the normal ringtone it emits through a barrage of speaker-crackle a low rumbling snarl, canine and aggressive. Goosebumps stand up on Kevin's arms and he shivers. Before the phone can ring

# CROSS THE WIRE.

again he reaches out and punches the call through to reception. He shakes his head. *What is it with dogs today?*

Darryl puts down his copy of *Nuts* and studies the monitor in front of him. The screen is split into quadrants which flick between images from the CCTV system's sixteen cameras. What has caught his attention is a sudden bright square in this hitherto uniformly drab patchwork, but he quickly sees it's just the bloke upstairs turning on the kitchen light.

*Ready to load himself up again on horrible brown muck from that fucking stupid machine. Nutter. What's he want to be at work at three in the bloody morning for anyway? He's probably been here all day and just not noticed everyone else has knocked off. No common sense, this lot. Earn a fortune sitting up there and barely know how to wipe their own arses some of them. Typing away all day like bloody secretaries. Not like anyone else understands a fucking word of what they do anyway.*

Darryl picks up his magazine again and begins to leaf through for the sixteenth time since his shift began. He struggles though to accord his usual avid scrutiny to the pages in front of him. He barely notices a photo-spread of Lisa Belby (20), studying for a BSc in Human Resource Management at Luton University, despite the fact that Lisa's own human resources are being barely managed by a threadlike bikini.

Darryl's sister has been nagging him that now his divorce has come through it's time for him to *get back out there*, which he suspects means out of her house and into somebody else's. To this end she has bought him a horrific tight sweater from Next, which she presented with the implausible claim that it will make him look slimmer and more sophisticated to potential *ladyfriends*. Darryl somehow managed to keep his mouth shut, but two days later the barely contained explosion is still echoing around his brain.

*Sophisticated?! It's bright fucking red! Are you trying to make me look like a ponce? And who the bloody hell has 'ladyfriends' anyway? It's more likely ladyboys I'll have after me if I go round wearing that fucking abortion.*

Tangling himself in mental knots over how he might ditch the loathsome garment without being chucked out into the street himself, Darryl barely even notices the captions which accompany a whole sequence of under-attired undergraduates.

aq Huge Saving on Meds Viagra Cialis Vicodin Discount bArgain Rate\$

Energy fur ihren Schwanz, kaufen und 85% sparen. Spezial-angebot Viiaaaaagra. Qualität 100%

Your male device will be super! Give her enlarged experience with your new turbo f|ck weapon.

Then the phone starts to growl.

Kevin crosses the darkness of the first floor back to his own desk. Text is still churning up through the consoles faster than he can read it, but it'll be a while before he has any results he can actually use. He can't start trying to fix anything until he has a

clear idea exactly what he's broken, or there's a serious risk he'll make things worse. And he certainly isn't going to tell anyone about the problem until he's dealt with it. That, or it becomes impossible not to notice.

He checks his e-mail. The current unread messages count is quite impressive: Inbox (295601498), Spam (999999999E). The application has clearly given up on enumerating the contents of the spam folder – if it's even still putting spam in there – but since it's apparently losing the ability to distinguish spam from non-spam it barely matters how it classifies incoming mail. He hopes no one over in California is trying to use the test network or he'll definitely be rumbled.

Kevin's stomach begins to churn and jitter, and he starts to wonder if maybe, just possibly, he has overdone the coffee. He can feel the tell-tale gastric hollowness, the tight brow and incipient digital trembling. Perhaps he should eat something. He makes for the back stairs and leaves the building via the car park. He fumbles his swipe-card through the security lock on the bike shed and with some difficulty removes the D-lock from the frame with shaking hands. The bike wobbles underneath him as he pushes off, but forward momentum overcomes the worst of his temporary lapses of directional judgement. He strikes out for the entrance to the science park and turns into the dual carriageway that leads over a road-bridge to the 24 hour supermarket. Traffic is limited to the occasional taxi, but as the caffeine grapples with his sense of balance he focuses squarely on the tarmac ten metres in front of him.

Along the road by the entrance to the science park are a series of large advertising hoardings. Kevin keeps his eyes on the road, ignoring the posed shots of attractive, well-dressed businesspeople advertising vacant high-tech office space and stylised images of the expensive German cars that such people might be induced to buy. A caption underneath the smiling, gender-balanced occupants of a multi-racial boardroom evades his attention.

We caught you naked pussy! Watch video here qvpfaea

Nor does he notice the slogan under a picture of a yellow sports car being removed from a gigantic jelly mould.

Paris making out with Britney. Explode like crazy with fearsome rod of pleasure!

Darryl puts down the magazine next to the phone and lifts the receiver. "Hello?" he says.

The howl when it comes is pain rather than sound, too loud for Darryl's brain to process as anything else. Reflexes try to pull the phone from his ear, but the waves breaking over him paralyse as well as deafen. He is transfixed as they drill into his head and burn the bones of his skull. Then the sound stops. For a second all is still, and then he sees the dark shape in the corner with its burning cold eyes, sees a great head rise and turn to look straight at him. In silence it slides from the shadows towards him.

He realises he can move. Drops the phone. Staggers to his feet and to the back of the room, thumps his face hard against the

glass door of the atrium and feels blood begin to ooze down his nostrils. He fumbles for his swipe-card, jerks it over the reader as the red light winks off and the green winks on. Through his shoulder he feels a dull shudder as the lock releases and the door swings open. He tumbles through onto his face again, picks himself up and tears down the atrium, runs for the back stairs trailing drops of blood like crumbs in a maze. He needs help, must find someone to help. *That coffee-drinking nutter is still here!* If he can find just find the nutter.

Kevin can see the vast grey shed of the supermarket as he crosses the bridge, the front brightly lit and badged in neon. In the near corner of the car park the downlit hood of the petrol station glows like an oversized desk lamp. He pedals on, his increased heart rate doing strange things to the caffeine and sugar swilling round his system. A void spreads inside him, driving all sensation outwards until he can feel nothing but an urgent tightness compressing his skin. His heart flutters and skips like a trapped moth and the back of his head seems somehow disconnected from the front. Perhaps he's going to throw up. Perhaps he just needs a Mars bar, or maybe some chocolate milk. He funnels shaking down the slip road and dumps his bike on the garage forecourt near the newspaper stands, doubtful he'll be able to lift it again in his current state.

In the stark strip-lit white of the service station shop he accumulates an armful of garish confectionary packets before spotting a hot pie cabinet on the opposite side of the room. He fumbles the sweets back onto a nearby shelf amid a collection of Christmas-tree shaped air fresheners and heads for the cabinet, wrenching it open and grabbing two paper bags spotted with grease from the Cornish pasties within. He doesn't look up at the lettering above the cabinet door.

The seven magnificent inches. Make her smile with enooooormous meat pole.

He rips open one of the packets and attacks the contents. Over several hours in the cabinet the pasty filling has become superheated and he feels the skin beginning to blister off the roof of his mouth, but he carries on eating without pause. He makes for the counter and, still chewing and gulping, waves the pasty packets at the assistant and slaps a ten pound note on the counter. The assistant, only too familiar with the behaviour of late-night, non-driving patrons keys in the code for the pasties, takes the money and gives him his change without a word. Kevin smiles through a mouthful of grey and orange sludge, pockets the change and heads back out to his bike. The assistant watches him through the window as he sits on the forecourt kerb and scoffs the second pastry. He shakes his head and sits to wait for the next drunken idiot to show up.

"Giant gnarly love-tool!" he says, as Kevin bins the pasty wrappers and wobbles off on his bike.

Behind Darryl as he runs for the stairs, the shadowy hound takes two slow steps and springs at the door. Its shape flickers as it meets the glass, distending flat and long as it passes through the gap between the edge of the door and the glass wall surrounding it. On the other side it resumes normal shape, still in the air, lands without sound. It takes two great bounds along the atrium and then lifts itself up again, soaring over the parapet

of the bridge and onto the first floor where Darryl is emerging from the stairwell. As it begins to cross the floor the beast emits a deep growl, claws tapping on the metal walkway as it advances through the darkness.

Darryl screams as the monstrous bulk leaps full stretch at his head.

As he cycles back Kevin feels the slurry of animal fat and industrial carbohydrates in his stomach begin to take effect. The worst of the caffeine-shakes have left him, and a couple of glasses of water back at the office should clear his head completely. His tests will just be finishing, and he should have four hours or so to get things fixed. No problem. Whatever defect he introduced was almost certainly just a slip. It'll only take a few seconds to fix when he knows where it is. He starts to feel relaxed and positive then, as he turns across the opposite lane to pull into the science park, he notices a hoarding by the entrance. Underneath an enormous image of a roll-top bath, surrounded by candles and with the head and shoulders of a recumbent model visible above the rim, is a phrase he has never seen but recognises instantly. Kevin! Discount watch for you R0|ex, Breitling, P|tek Philippe, 80% off!

The calming effect of the two pasties dissolves in sudden gastrointestinal panic. He pedals hard back to the office, ditching his bike by the shed without bothering to lock it and legging it up the stairs, half-registering that the security guard is not in reception at the other end of the atrium. At his desk the terminals are still chewing through data, and the test e-mail client has run out of disk space and given up. In a panic he switches to his browser and loads some news sites. The top story on the BBC is Magic is in the air. Gucci and Prada shoes are flying off our shelves at these LOW prices! CNN are running with No Erectile Dysfunction! 12 Free ViAgrA with any order more than \$300! There is no way this can possibly be happening.

There is a sudden noise from the other side of the room. Kevin looks up and sees a dark shape moving in a corner behind some empty desks. It is indistinct at first, crouching rather than standing upright, but as it leaps up onto a desk he can see that it's the security guard. A swath of yellow light illuminates the guard's head and shoulders as he squats on his haunches on the desk, sniffing the air. Kevin can clearly see the cold glow of his eyes, but something about his shape is wrong, the edges blurring into the air around him, making the man look enormous and somehow canine. Kevin sits absolutely still, but with the light of two monitors shining directly on his face there is no way he can avoid being seen. Abruptly the man on the desk throws back his head and begins to unwind a long, deafening yowl. The sound spikes Kevin at the base of the spine, shooting up across his shoulders and into the back of his head. His mind flicks back to the sound he heard before, sees again the dark beast, its fangs and empty eyes. In panic he stands, the backs of his knees striking his chair and propelling it back on its casters. It shoots towards the wall and strikes it with a bang. The howl cuts short and the guard turns towards Kevin. He crouches slowly and then springs upwards, leaping across the desks in huge bounds like some chimera of dog and ape.

Kevin starts to run, without knowing why makes for the bridge, running rather than thinking. The creature changes course to

intercept him, leaping from desk to desk, knocking over monitors, scattering trinkets and knick-knacks, crushing the gew-gaws of trade shows and developer conferences. Kevin's toe catches on a flat rubber strip sitting on the carpet tiles, designed to stop people tripping over the cables running underneath. He stumbles forward, falling rather than running, torso almost parallel to the ground. Somehow he gets in a couple of extra steps and flies across the bridge into the kitchen, tumbling onto the floor beneath the coffee machine. The creature behind him slows, crossing the bridge with nonchalant pads, each footfall scraping like nails on the metal bridge. Then it stops. Kevin sits up, feels the smooth surface of a cupboard door behind his back and hears the gurgle and hiss of the machine above his head. He gets his feet underneath him, half pushes, half slides himself upwards, never removing his gaze from the bulky shape on the bridge.

The creature tilts back its head once more and opens its mouth. Before Kevin can consciously register the assault on his eardrums both hands have flown up and clamped against the sides of his head. This time it is not the howl of a beast, but machine noise. It oscillates between intolerable frequencies, harsh and unrelenting like a million amplified modems screeching inside his skull. Kevin's hands clamp tighter and tighter against his ears, fingernails digging into his scalp, but he can't block out the sound. Can't block out enough to make it bearable. Somewhere in his agonised brain he starts to register meaning in the stream of noise.

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The noise stops. The creature looks down, stares at Kevin, crouches down. Then it leaps at him with the force of a piston. As the black shape arcs towards his head Kevin drops to the floor. He feels a searing numbness on his neck as some indistinct limb tears at him, scours great welts into his flesh, and then the creature strikes the machine above him in an explosion of sparks. There is a crunch of bone and the security guard slides down the fascia like a rag doll, crumpling on top of Kevin's legs. He does not get up. Kevin lies still a moment, breathing heavily, but then something catches his eye and he looks up.

The little display panel is flashing up sentences faster than he can read them. He catches odd words, thinks he catches them, Cialis, ROle><, Erection, Discount, until words too are unreadable and the panel is just a strobe light. The machine begins to creak and groan like a car being crushed in a compactor. All around dark shapes flicker and shift as if it is part of something huge but only semi-visible. Heavy as it is the machine starts to shake, inching forwards and to the side, and Kevin hears the sound of steam as a nozzle somewhere opens up. He scoots backwards towards the bridge, the machine shuddering and shaking. Steam bursts out like a New York manhole, the hiss and rumble punctuated by heavy thumps as the machine whacks the sides of its cubicle on the worktop. There is the piercing crack of a safety valve blowing out and the whole apparatus shoots upwards and

thumps against a steel joist in the ceiling. Kevin feels the floor shake as it crashes back down onto the body of the security guard, broadcasting the contents of his skull out across the floor in a gory nimbus.

Kevin gapes through thick scalding air. The guard's arms and legs begin to twitch. Amid a thundering hiss of steam, the contorted limbs shudder and heave as the body staggers to its knees, shoulders still bent under the black machine as if crouched in prayer. Then it kneels up, the huge steam-spewing lump of metal lifting on bloody shoulders where the guard's head used to be, its LCD panel glowing like the eye of a demented cyclops.

"LOUIS VUITTON 經典單肩斜跨包!!!" screams Kevin. He struggles to get up but his trembling legs give way and he falls back on his behind. The beast judders and shakes like a vast over-boiling kettle, belches gouts of steam as it lurches forward. Kevin gets his hands behind him and pulls himself back as the creature shambles towards him, but still the thing gets closer, the unplugged Ethernet cable dragging behind it like a tail. It lets out a great scream which shakes the bridge and blows out the toughened glass all round the building in a turmoil of shards. Kevin's hands fly again to his ears and he sits frozen as the beast advances. From the dark end of the bridge he sees it silhouetted against the opening into the strip-lit kitchen. Then he sees it pause and kneel. It picks up the Ethernet cable in a shattered hand and thrusts the jack into a nearby socket. The screaming grows louder still and the whole building begins to rumble and shake. Kevin falls flat, hands still clamped to his ears, closes his eyes as the cable ignites in an incandescent flash. Then the coffee machine explodes, pulping what is left of the security guard and spraying shrapnel and tissue around the kitchen and down into the atrium. The bridge creaks and groans, but does not give way.

In the silence Kevin opens his eyes. He can feel slivers of metal embedded in his face and hands but he can still see. Somehow he staggers to his feet, his clothes shredded by the blast and the skin beneath covered in bleeding lacerations. Holding on to the rail of the bridge he moves slowly back to the devastated kitchen. A stump of incinerated cable dangles from the Ethernet socket, and where it meets the wall five black diagonal lines like the swipe of a giant claw are gouged into the plaster. A constant whine sounds over the muffled void of his damaged hearing, but vaguely he discerns noise from outside the building. He drags himself back over the bridge into the main office area and stares through a shattered window. The dozen or so cars which have been left overnight in the car park all have lights flashing and alarms sounding. He looks across at the tall building on the opposite side of the road and sees lights blinking on and off on all ten floors. It takes him a while to realise that the blinking is not random. Scrolling across the face of the building on the ten by twenty matrix of windows are letters thirty metres high.  
zzfa Pin-hole camera toilet video, special price! Don't disappoint!  
She longing for throbbing spunk cannon Kevin!! Pffff

In the distance, faint through ringing ears, he hears a howling.

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Adrian Joyce has worked in a firework factory, a postal sorting office, and on various technology projects involving secret prototypes and the abuse of acronyms. He is a graduate of the Centre for New Writing in Manchester, and this is his first published story.

# THE GODFAKES BY JEREMIAH TOLBERT

The dead expedition member floats on the surface of the ocean, his body too heavy to escape the currents that drag him down. His corpse drifts from the shallow reefs into deeper water where he sinks ever downward. He is lost to the total darkness of the abyssal plains. The corpse ends its fall with a gentle splash in the thick benthic sediments.

The body blooms like a flower, releasing an irresistible smell of fresh rot. Life awakens. Strange polychaetes burrow into the body from the benthos, confused at the unusual taste, but the chemistry of life is analogous enough. Skitterlings nervously dart from their burrows and clip away at his wetsuit to get at the flesh inside.

These are only the first to feast. It is not long before even larger scavengers are drawn in.



ILLUSTRATED BY MARTIN BLAND

# GHEMISONE



Muskblue does not see the godfall, as it gives off no light. She instead tastes its rot with her filterstalks, feathery organs sensitive to minute changes in chemistry in the water. Muskblue tastes the seascape, the presence of her sisters and their clouds of feisty broodlings. Always and loudest, she tastes the protective chemsong of Mother in the center of their pod, picking over the remains of their last captured godfall.

Muskblue cannot remember the last food she was allowed. The scent of this godfall meat is overwhelming.

She has drifted as far away from the pod as she can bring herself, so far that she risks her life in waters where Mother's chemsong is weak enough that predators might catch Muskblue's own scent or see the subtle flash of her chromatophores. Her translucent skin provides some protection against the creatures that hunt with reflections of light, but some hunt by taste as she does. The foulness of the chemsong is the only defense against such monsters.

Muskblue has been praying to the Gods for a quick death. Life within the pod is no longer bearable. There can be no life outside the pod. But she will not give her flesh to the pod. Instead, let one of the beasts take her, she decided. Until tasting the godfall.

Muskblue drifts on the low currents, ever closer to the limits of Mother's chemsong, away from her sisters and the clouds of irritating brood, but closer now to the food.

A small cluster of broodlings brush past, taking bites from her without fear. She shudders in pain. Even the stupid broodlings know her lowly status. Muskblue has no broodlings of her own to protect her, no joined mate with which to create them. She is too weak from hunger to even form a small protective chem in the cellular factories that run along her long, emaciated flanks.

Muskblue is always last of the sisters Mother allows to feed. Little but gristle and bone remains, usually. Muskblue has searched her memories of youth, wondering what offense she could have given, but finds none. The pod is large, and someone must be weakest. The Gods have decreed that to be her role.

Now, she tastes for her sisters, waiting to learn if they have sensed this odd new godfall. They are caught up in their gossip and stories. Their flashes of bioluminescent lightspeak are bright and fearless, deep within Mother's chemsong cloud.

She finds more confidence now. Muskblue follows the new taste further away from the chemsong than she has ever risked before. Hunger overrides her fear and suicidal thoughts. There is godfall near! Muskblue greedily grasps for the source of the taste/smell resting on the world's floor.

She runs her four broad, flat arms over the godfall, coiling around it, probing, flushing the taste to her stalks. The godfall is small and shaped differently from every other she has found. It is thin, straight, only three times as long as Muskblue, with two narrow limbs at each end. The meat could feed two of the pod at most – most godfalls could feed the pod for many shifts before Mother led them away in search for another.

She should not eat this meat, even if it is not normal. It tastes edible, delicious, but to feed without Mother's permission is to sin against the Gods. If Mother learns that she has found food and not signalled its location to the pod, Muskblue will be punished severely.

This would make a substantial feast for a solitary individual, she thinks, if she could get past the bad taste. The godfall is stiff

and the outside tastes unpalatable, but here and there, she finds holes in the outer surface where the rich taste of meat spills out.

Such an unusual shape, not like the familiar, bulky bodies of godfall. It has no filterstalks, although other scavengers may have picked them away. She thinks the spherical object at one end might be the sense organ – the flesh is more delicate there, like the feathery stalks.

As she tugs at the outer surface, pulling the foul-tasting parts away to expose the meat, a piece slips away, hard, cold, and sharp-tasting. Its edge cuts her arm. For a moment, Muskblue panics, releasing a small and weak cloud of chem to mask the blood.

Muskblue leaves the meat aside to inspect the object – it is like the knives that the godfalls sometimes carry. Muskblue hurriedly hides the object in her pouch, coating the hard blade with a protective layer of mucus.

The greatest sin in the eyes of the Gods is to withhold food from one's sisters. The pod will strip her to nothing, cut off her arms and filterstalks and leave her to drift blind in the silent dark. Senseless, unable to control her direction.

But still...

No one else has smelled the meat. *Just a little*, she thinks. Enough so she can make chem to protect her from the brood clouds. Just a little, so that perhaps her chem will attract a mindless male from the quiet dark.

She feels a thrill sweep through her at the thought. She imagines tasting his presence as he darts forth, a bright and shining beacon. The sharp sweet pain of him biting her lateral vein and feeding. Just one male, not dozens of mates like Mother – it's all she wants. She could never dream of more stature, but one would be enough for her to give birth to her own brood. Even if they never matured, she could at least feed on them in the lean times as her sisters did.

Muskblue's filterstalks fan out to taste for approaching sisters as she devours the meat. She doesn't mean to eat it all, but it tastes so strange and new that she loses track of time in the sensation. Some parts of the meat are inedible, and she disgorges them. The pieces drift to the Bottom and vanish in the muck. She stirs the muck, hoping the smell will cover the taste of meat.

After a rest to allow digestion, she nervously sprays fresh chem. It is not nearly strong enough to protect from the predators, but its bitterness will shield her from the hungry mouths of the brood clouds. She hurries back into the heart of the pod, before her absence is noted.

She speaks little to her sisters, and they ignore her presence – all except for Tangred, a sister from her own brood, but favored by Mother. Tangred lightspeaks a greeting from a gathering of older sisters, then swims away to meet Muskblue.

"We missed you at the Telling," Tangred says.

"I'm sorry." Muskblue's colors dim with obedient shame. She knows her place, even if the forbidden meat has restored her energy. Tangred's status is greater. "I was too hungry to focus on the stories."

"Sweetviolet told the Banishing tale," Tangred says. "The taste of it was like never before. Such vividness. You would have liked it. It made me ache to understand the Gods."

It does sound like something Muskblue would have liked. She has always loved the sad stories that explain the why of pods, how their ancestors had once lived in the heavens. The Gods had

become angry and cast them out from grace and into the Deep Banishment. What Muskblue especially loves are the descriptions of heaven's food. There is meat to be taken everywhere. No Mother could stop a daughter from feeding. No Mother needs to, in such bounty.

"Mother noticed your absence and commented on it. You will never rise in status if you continue to catch her attention this way."

"I cannot catch her attention in any other way," Muskblue angrily flashes. "What would you have me do?"

"Such vehemence." Tangred's colors are vibrant and thoughtful. "You seem stronger since last speaking to me. Why/how?"

Muskblue thinks quickly. "It is only my disappointment in not pleasing Mother. There is strength in shame."

"Perhaps. But then what is that unusual taste about you?"

"I don't know what you mean," Muskblue says.

"It is like meat!" Tangred flashes excitedly. "Before, you said you were hungry. Are you hungry no longer?"

"No, no, no," Muskblue flashes more brightly than appropriate.

"The Gods' gifts are for the pod, not one sister," Tangred scolds, but her colors are sympathetic. "If you share your find with me, I will not tell the others."

"There is no more." Muskblue wishes she had not been so greedy. Tangred will not hesitate to use her knowledge of Muskblue's sin to advance in the pod. Mother might reward her with a choice bit of the next godfall for this, enough to make her strong enough to draw another mate.

"I knew it! Your chem is too strong, and my brood does not sting you like usual." Tangred's flash is rapid and dim so the others cannot see. "Where did you find it?"

"At the edge of Mother's chemsong, out near the silence," Muskblue says.

"Are you sure there is nothing left?" Hopeful colors.

Muskblue hesitates. The godfall meat was like no other that she had tasted. She couldn't be sure that no morsel remained. It was much smaller than any other godfall their pod had ever found. "I don't know," she says.

"Let's search." Tangred swims away from the pod. Muskblue follows obediently. The rush of energy from the meat is already fading, and her despair begins to return.

They drift away as far as they dare and taste the silence. Once, Muskblue thinks that she senses the flavor of the strange meat again, but it is only an echo. It was unique, and she had kept it all for herself. Guilt at this, but pleasure too. There are few ways to rebel within the pod. Even if Mother never knows what she has done, as she hopes, her sin gives her secret pleasure.

Tangred makes no attempt to hide her disappointment. As they return to the safety of the heavier chemsong, she threatens to reveal Muskblue's sin to the others.

"Have mercy," Muskblue pleads. "I was weak and as thoughtless as a male. I was mad with hunger, sister."

"Perhaps you could give me some trinket to ensure my silence," Tangred says. A jolt of fear strikes as Muskblue wonders if Tangred somehow knows of the knife. Muskblue is relieved that her sister does not ask for it. "A skitterling shell would please me."

Muskblue pretends to reluctantly give over a smooth skitterling carapace from her pouch. Inwardly, she feels triumphant.

As she transfers the shell to Tangred's eager arms, the chemsong suddenly grows loud and sour around them.

"Where have you been, Muskblue?" Mother flashes brightly. Muskblue hurts at the intensity of it. Mother's brood cloud swarms around them, ignoring Muskblue's protective chem to nip her skin. No chem protects against Mother's brood except her own.

"Tasting at the quiet dark," Muskblue lies. "Seeking godfalls for you."

"Is this true?" Mother asks Tangred. Tangred pauses just long enough to compose her answer – a mistake that Muskblue realizes too late. Mother lashes out with a god's knife, cutting Tangred deeply. Tangred curls up on herself in agony.

"No," Tangred flashes weakly. "Muskblue has sinned."

Suddenly, everything churns and Muskblue is blinded by the activity of so many bodies moving at once. The sisters gather tightly around, called by Mother's furious chemsong.

Mother prods Tangred with her blade again, not yet enough to break her skin. "Tell us more," she demands.

Muskblue thinks to flee. She still has enough food in her that she might survive the effort of escape. But she will not last long alone. There is no leaving the pod. There never has been. A calm descends upon her as she accepts this fate. She knew the risk she took by eating the meat.

Tangred tells the pod in loud flashes of Muskblue's secret feeding. The angry, aghast responses of the sisters choke the water and send the brood clouds scattering in fear. They call for her death.

"Show me your shame," Mother demands. She grasps Muskblue with a massive arm, holding her firmly. Muskblue, flashing colors of absolute obedience, leads Mother and the sisters to the indigestible bits in the mud.

Mother's chemsong becomes thoughtful. She too recognizes the strangeness. For a brief moment, Muskblue hopes that she will declare the meat to not be proper godfall, and exempt from sinning.

Now her sisters demand to be allowed to devour Muskblue alive, piece by piece, a punishment from the Tellings meant only for those who brought great misfortune to their pods. Muskblue remains silent.

Mother listens to the demands a while. Her chemsong forces silence. She drifts without light, deep in thought for many pulses of current before pronouncing Muskblue's punishment.

"Exile," she says. "For sinning against the pod, Muskblue shall know no chemsong for four shifts. Afterward, she will be accepted back to the pod and forgiven." It is no different from a death sentence, Muskblue knows. Without the protection of the chemsong, she will not live one shift, let alone four. Her anger flashes bright and into the infrared.

"You would kill me without striking a blow," she says with all the luminescence she can muster. "Bring your god knives at me and do the deed yourself."

Shocked darkness. The chemsong alters to amusement. "A little strange meat and you become interesting, Muskblue. If I had known you had it within you, I might have fed you better. The punishment stands."

Mother glides away, and the sisters follow, filterstalks pointed back to taste if Muskblue attempts to follow. She considers it. It

would force them to fight, and perhaps she might tear an arm or two away from a sister. It could give her something to feed upon before the predators descend from above. But what is the point?

Mother's chemsong grows quieter until, for the first time in her life, Muskblue cannot taste it at all. She is alone in the dark quiet. A great shuddering overtakes her. She floats to the muck below, waiting for the end to come. Her mind blanks in the absence of stimulus. No light, no chem, only emptiness.

She thinks of how Tangred betrayed her, despite demanding to share in the sin. It is this memory, this injustice, that stirs Muskblue.

She pours her remaining energy into the strongest chem she can manage, composing elements to formulate notes of toxic structure like Mother's song. It is a basic melody, but beautiful in its simplicity. Muskblue admires her work with awe. Perhaps it will protect her long enough that she can return to the pod, but only if she does not starve to death first. She must find more food, she realizes.

Muskblue draws the strange, cold knife from her pouch, brushing away the mucus on her filterstarks and recycling the precious protein strings. She wields the knife in her arm and begins to swim just above the plain. In the quiet dark, it is easy to taste even the smallest things.

She hunts skitters. Their hard shells make getting at their meat difficult, but it is something. She feels some strength return after capturing and devouring three.

Some time later, she tastes the presence looming above. The scent drifts down, faint, but in the quiet dark, it is unmistakable. It tastes of death and sharpness and digesting acid. It is unimaginably huge, putting off taste everywhere as it draws near.

Instinctively, Muskblue flares her arms, attempting to increase her size. The beast rushes downward, flashes of incoherent light blazing to disorient her.

Sharp teeth close around an arm. With a jerk, the predator tears away. Simultaneously, Muskblue lashes out with the blade, striking something soft, and feels the blade cut deep. She has wielded knives before in disputes with other pods over godfall. This knife is sharper than any other she has held.

A rush of rich meat juice flares across her filterstarks. She knows that this one blow is all that she will deal – the predator is too fast and it blinds her to its movements with the intense pulses of light.

Another attack does not come. The taste of Muskblue's would-be killer fades into the distance. Perhaps this predator is not accustomed to prey that fights back. She finds grim satisfaction in this.

The stump of her arm trickles blood. The taste disorients her and brings back memories of a young Sourgreen. Sourgreen had been the weakest, before. Mother let her starve until she could no longer swim against the current. She was carried up into the heavens where lightning eels struck. They showered bits of Sourgreen down upon the pod. Muskblue sucked greedily for flesh, as did all her sisters. Little was wasted in the pod.

Muskblue pushes down to the muck and rubs the stump into it. Lancing pain shoots through her body, but the stump grows cold and numb. *This should mask the taste*, she thinks.

She pulls herself along the muck floor like a skitter, moving in the direction of the pod. Her stalks are oriented to the heavens

to taste for another attack. She loses track of the time, drifts in and out of memories. The quiet dark calms her now.

She wanders for a shift, tasting faint traces of Mother's chem and little else. A flash in the darkness sends her sprawling flat against the mud. Something small and bright zooms by, tasting so familiar she cannot believe it.

*It is a trick of the quiet dark*, she thinks.

When the tiny male darts back and circles her, flashing a pattern of courtship, she chems a more beautiful song than she ever thought she could make. More beautiful even than Mother's. She strings together the organic notes in harmonies never tasted before.

The little male, driven by her chemsong, latches on beneath her arms and bites, just a small jolt of pain, and then they are one. In an explosion of ecstasy, they release sperm and egg all around them.

Muskblue struggles not to devour the eggs, instead following ancient instinct. She draws the eggs one after another into her pouch. Contentment at this, despite her exhaustion.

A mate. A brood too, soon. She never truly believed these things would ever happen for her. The odd godfall has brought a mixture of fortune – she cannot help but feel that it was a message from the Gods, in answer to her prayers.

Later, after the bliss fades, she tastes an unfamiliar chemsong. Another pod swims nearby. It is not one that she recognizes, and she can only guess at the pod's strength. She considers approaching and making an offering of peace – there is an ancient Telling regarding the Adopted Daughter. Things did not end well for her in the Telling, but still some pods considered loners a sign of good luck and would accept them. Many others would devour them and move on.

Muskblue grips her god knife and huddles low. She feels the male's body press against her belly. It is a reason to continue, to avoid unnecessary risk. She waits until the chem fades before she continues.

Two more shifts pass without any sight of food. With the male sapping her strength, and so much lost to the birth of the eggs, Muskblue comes to rest in the muck and contemplates the cruel fate the Gods have given her.

To survive, she will have to eat her unhatched young. It will be many, many shifts before she can make more eggs. But if she does not live, she will never make more. The decision should not trouble her as much as it does. It feels like giving in to failure after struggling so long.

Muskblue expels the eggs from her pouch. They float, luminescing softly, tiny sisters and little males growing within already. Sisters do not feel sentiment for their broods. That the strong survive is all that matters in the pod.

Something lands with a soft swoosh in the muck nearby, ruffling her stalks and kicking up a swirl of familiar flavor. The strange godfall taste is thick as chemsong.

Another and another, she can taste the falls. Godfall rains down all around her; the strange new type of meat now mixed with the old gods. Wounded bodies, torn and mutilated, spilling their taste. Lightning eels and other shapes flashing light dart

above, in and out of detection among the bulks of meat.

Muskblue imagines what must be happening in the heavens. The old gods and the new are at war with one another. Perhaps over a godfall from a higher heaven? Waves of new gods strike with their cold blades – the old gods lash with tails, strangle with arms. The battle is surrounded in a glow of light that comes from everywhere at once, illuminating the *shapes* of things, not their tastes. The image comes from some deep recess of her mind.

The Tellings teach that pods came from the heavens. The Gods made the pods and cast them into Banishment to wait for their message. The Gods have never spoken, not in taste or chem or light.

Now they speak with bounty. Muskblue cannot count the number of godfalls around her. It seems as if the meat will never end. What is the message? What are the Gods saying?

*Come to us, she thinks. Here is the strength. Rise to heaven and join us.* The thought does not seem as if it is her own.

Muskblue retrieves her eggs. She feeds ravenously upon the bounty, swelling with fresh gore. As she feeds, she crafts a new chemsong. It tastes of the new meat, of richness and wealth. It is the chemsong of the new godfalls. It speaks of the future and of purpose.

Satiated for the first time, she is ready. She will find her pod and lead her sisters to this feast. And then, they will climb to Heaven and answer the call of the Gods.

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Jeremiah Tolbert grew up wanting to be a marine biologist, but was told that doing so without having ever seen the ocean might not be a good move. He finally saw the ocean for the first time when he was 19, but by then it was too late – the Internet had been invented. Today, Jeremiah is a freelance web designer and photographer living in Colorado in the US. His website is [jeremiaholtolbert.com](http://jeremiaholtolbert.com).

# Clementa

a novel

Jim Martin

In a future world where humankind has learned how to thrive in harmony with a flourishing Nature, an oppressed people awakens to its rage.

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# the Festival of Tethselem

## by Chris Butler

**M**arrow flung his arms in the air, then let them flop down again and stood staring incredulously at the crate sitting on the dock.

"Is there a problem?" the Captain asked him.

I stood in the shade of a parasol, enjoying the breeze wafting down from the Pajan hills. Some livestock in cages were bleating and snorting as they were lifted off the boat.

"My men have deserted me," Marrow moaned. His wife was standing nearby, and she gave him an impatient look.

The Captain frowned. "What kind of men *were* they?"

Marrow replied with a helpless look. He had managed to raise the funds to pay for his travel, but had hired the lowest kind of help. It was not difficult for me to pay men of that sort a little more to go elsewhere.

"Well, if you want your crate aboard," the Captain said, "you will have to pay the local dockhands to load it." There were no robots or air-crane here; it was a primitive port, relying on manual labour for loading and unloading. "You better be quick about it. We leave on the hour, with or without you."

"It's not just a matter of getting the exhibit onboard," Marrow went on. "After the sailing it will need transporting over land to Tethselem. I thought this was all arranged, but now I –"

It was then that Devesh stepped forward. He wore the blue suit, a good choice, looked refined and trustworthy, an answer to the woes of a man in need. "I couldn't help overhearing. Did you say Tethselem?"

Marrow nodded, "I am to exhibit my art there; alongside the Figure of Frozen Time, and many other works. It is a once in a lifetime opportunity."

"And your art is in this crate?" Devesh asked.

"Yes. It is a construction, disassembled for transport. We've come so far already, it's taken weeks."

"I've long wished to see Tethselem," Devesh said with all sin-

cerity. "If you will let me go with you, I can arrange and ensure safe transportation for the rest of your journey, for you and your exhibit."

Marrow smiled with obvious relief. He gestured to his side, "And for my wife, of course." His mood darkened suddenly and he said, "How much will this cost? I am not a wealthy man."

Devesh shook his head. "If you can get me into Tethselem it will be payment enough. They rarely allow outsiders through the city gates. Of course I had planned to attend the festival when it opens, but to go in early will be so much better. I'll make all arrangements. We'll even help you assemble the exhibit on arrival if that would help."

Marrow held out his hand. "Please be as good as your word," he said. "My name is Lalitchandra Marrow."

They shook hands briskly, Devesh introducing himself in turn. Then he lifted his hand into the air and beckoned me over to him. I approached him quickly. "Mr Devesh?"

"James, we need to get this man's crate onboard. Quick as you can or we will miss the sailing. We can arrange the rest once we're underway."

Of course I had some men ready and waiting. I hurried away to give them the nod, taking care to make it look as if I were arranging it only then. We loaded the crate onto the boat, the *Blue Horizon*, and we sailed on the hour.

After night fell I stood at the railing on the deck for a while, staring out into the dark. A little of the light from the boat's lanterns was reflected back from the ripples in the water. I thought about the legend that had brought us here. I thought about the unusual energy readings we had mapped when we flew over the city of Tethselem some weeks earlier.

Devesh came to join me. "All right?" he asked.

I nodded. "Couldn't you sleep?"

The lanterns seemed to cast shadows into the age lines that

had started to deepen in his face. He wore a short-sleeved shirt and loose trousers, rested his arms on the railing and stared out. "No. I'll try again in a while."

We had known each other a long time; I had served with him as a raw recruit in the battle at Aajann, where so many died. He had taken me under his wing, then and in the years since. After the end of the war, so many dead but not us, we had persevered together through hard times, until now we were rich beyond our needs. Did we really *need* to attempt another theft?

I could not ask him that question here where we might be overheard. I kept him company for a while. I find quietness unappealing when shared so we talked to fill the silence, speaking only of unimportant things until I grew too tired and retired to my room.

There was hardly anyone on deck when I rose early the next morning. The chug of the *Blue Horizon*'s motors echoed out across the river, and their thrum could be felt in the soles of my feet. The low sun filtered through the trees cast the scene in pastel shades of blue and green. A terrabird flew low across the water, creating barely a ripple in the perfect surface as it landed.

Hard to believe that only a few decades earlier the world had been devastated in the war. I could see no evidence here, now, of the past destruction heaped upon so many. I understood that Tethselem itself had escaped almost entirely unscathed.

"Good morning, James." It was Devesh's voice. No great surprise that he had come up on deck at about the same time as myself – we had known each other a long time and our routines were more or less in sync. I turned around to face him. "Did you sleep well?" he asked me.

"Sleep of the innocent," I said.

He gave me a wry smile. "I wish I could say the same."

In daylight, the grey around his eyes was even more apparent. "It's not too late to change your mind, you know, about Tethselem."

He gave me an admonishing look, but it seemed a small enough remark and at this stage it was no secret that we were headed for Tethselem.

The bird flapped its heavy wings several times and lifted slowly from the surface, as if fighting to drag up an anchor weight.

Another voice interrupted us. "Hello, I'm Sahana Marrow," she said, and held out a hand to Devesh. "Lalitchandra's wife."

"Ah yes, I believe we saw you at the dock." Devesh held her hand briefly.

She reached past him to shake my hand also. "A pleasure to meet you," I said.

Her hair was pinned tightly, clear green eyes dominating her features. She held a cloth hat in her hands. "I suppose we shall be in each other's pockets for a while," she said.

Devesh said to her, "Are you looking forward to visiting Tethselem?"

"I'm a historian," she said. Presumably she considered this was sufficient answer.

I asked, "What is your area of expertise?"

She smiled wistfully. "At this moment my primary interest is the history of Tethselem, and of course the Figure of Frozen Time. Such a conundrum, isn't it?"

"I'm certainly looking forward to seeing it," Devesh said.

"From the descriptions I've read, it seems a curious thing."

"Curious." She seemed amused. "Yes. Supposedly the Figure hasn't been touched for thousands of years. No photographs, no detailed scans have ever been permitted. Exactly what it is and how it was made is uncertain."

She cast a glance at each of us, inviting further discussion, or perhaps just daring us to disagree. I shrugged, pretending indifference.

Devesh just smiled and said, "Will you join us for breakfast, Mrs Marrow?"

As the sun lifted higher the thin trail of white cloud cleared and sunlight flooded the deck. She pressed her hat onto her head for shade. "I'll wait a few minutes until my husband comes up on deck," she said. "If there is room at your table we shall join you."

Devesh nodded politely and we made our way inside. I was unexpectedly intrigued by Sahana Marrow. We had researched both of them, of course, and they were only intended to be useful as a means to gain entry into Tethselem at the earliest opportunity; every extra day inside the city walls might prove invaluable. But meeting someone in the flesh often brings surprises. I made sure we sat at an empty table and I was glad when they did join us a few minutes later.

She sat down next to me and before even touching her food she said, "It's the philosophy that interests me."

Her husband gave her a puzzled look.

I dabbed at my mouth with a napkin. "The philosophy. Of the Figure?"

Lalitchandra's eyes lit up as he caught the topic of conversation. "Ah! The Figure of Frozen Time. It is a strange belief these people have, that the Figure must never be stolen. If it were ever stolen it would be as if it had never existed!"

My pulse quickened as he spoke of it.

"It is delicious," Devesh said, acting as if he had never given the matter any consideration until that moment. It occurred to me that possibly he was actually referring to his breakfast, and I had to fight to suppress a smile.

"But what does that actually mean?" Sahana asked. "And what would happen if it *were* stolen?" She seemed very serious, as befits an academic, I suppose. "Would thousands of years of history be undone? What then would become of all of us?"

I asked her, "What do the people of Tethselem *think* would happen?"

"I'm looking forward to asking them that question," she said. "Little information seems to escape Tethselem. Some historical texts, but it's always fiendishly difficult to interpret writing from so long ago."

"I imagine that the old scriptures and the modern beliefs of the people might differ considerably," I said.

Her mood changed entirely in that moment. Perhaps I had demonstrated a degree of understanding she had not anticipated. The change was so sudden I wondered if I had revealed too much insight into a topic I should be pretending indifference to. Oh, but how could anyone be indifferent to such a subject? She dipped her head, trying to disguise an amused smile, I thought, and at last began to eat her breakfast.

I glanced at Devesh. He appeared to have no further interest in the conversation, but I knew better. The Figure had a firm

hold on him, almost an obsession. Was it the professional challenge of it, the chance to commit the perfect crime? Or was it something deeper, something he could not yet speak of?

A few days later we disembarked, at Berem where the river twisted away from Tethselem so we would have to make the rest of the journey over land. Berem was a just a tiny village, managing only a modest amount of trade from the river.

It was fortunate I had made prior arrangements for our guides and transport. Tethselem's festival of art was unusual and Berem's meagre facilities would be stretched to cope with the influx of people. Marrow's crate was loaded onto a cart pulled by some foul-smelling cattle, and there were more of the beasts for us to ride. Though they stank to high heaven it was far preferable to walking. We had a long, steep climb ahead in a fierce dry heat.

Lalitchandra looked appalled as he climbed up onto his ride and settled himself uncertainly. I did not think much of him; or his art, for that matter, judging by the publicity material I'd seen. I supposed it must be representative of some modern school.

He had at least helped Sahana up onto hers. In truth she seemed more at ease; perhaps her job as a historian had involved some previous fieldwork. I made a mental note to ask her later. There was little opportunity for discussion on this part of the journey. The road was a mix of dry mud and stones and the beasts' hooves kicked up a lot of ochre dust. Our guides said little but kept us supplied with fresh water.

At last we crested a hill and saw Tethselem in the distance, its vast stone city walls rising high into the sky, out on a peak separated from us by a deep valley but with a massive bridge providing access. Our previous view of the city, from the air, had not given us the same sense of its scale.

Devesh came alongside me. I could barely make out signs of movement on the bridge; people were tiny against the enormity of the construction. How could it ever have been built? "It's impressive," I said.

"Even from this distance," he agreed.

The group started to move forward again, and we continued our climb. I felt uneasy. Getting into the city was one thing, escaping again might be quite another. I looked for similar signs of doubt in Devesh, but saw none. Perhaps it would have been wiser to heed my own feelings, to turn back while we still had the chance. But I did not think Devesh would turn back even if I asked him to, and I could not let him go on alone.

When we reached the bridge it towered over and around us, with a network of support beams, some as broad as fifty men stood shoulder to shoulder. Vines with green and white leaves twined around the smaller struts. One could believe the bridge had stood for thousands of years and would stand for thousands more.

Hooves clopped against wood as we began our journey across. The beasts never seemed to tire, though the rest of us were exhausted. The guards at the city gates were armed with swords, but they treated us politely. They seemed to recognise Lalitchandra and we were allowed inside without any great scrutiny.

Back on the boat I had hidden some tools inside Lalitchandra's crate, equipment that might prove useful in planning or carrying out our proposed theft of the Figure of Frozen Time. I had half-

expected that the crate would be searched.

Devesh said, "That was easier than I expected, James."

I nodded. Was it too easy?

Our guide said he would take us to a representative for the festival, a man named Handolay, who would look after us for the duration of our stay. The festival was scheduled to last for thirty days. We were all welcome to stay in the city, or to come and go as we pleased. He led us down a street that appeared to stretch for miles in a straight line ahead of us.

The streets were busy, crowds bustling around merchants selling from stalls. Though it was not oppressively hot there seemed little movement of the air trapped in the canyon streets. Children milled around our rides. A girl held up a hand to Devesh, but he rode on. I gazed up towards the rooftops. The worn stone buildings were tall, like tenements.

Our party came to the central courtyard where Handolay stood waiting to meet us. We all climbed down from the beasts, and Marrow went to have words with him. I stood beside Devesh, but he barely noticed me. His attention was fixed on the buildings surrounding us, perhaps wondering which one contained the Figure.

Handolay seemed to be an efficient local man who hustled around, helping us get settled. He explained that we would be taken to our rooms. Then we would eat. Work would begin on assembling Marrow's piece in the morning. So, tired as I was, I knew I must retrieve Devesh's equipment from the crate that night.

Another few days passed before we got our first sight of the artefact. In the meantime we had assembled Marrow's exhibit in a building some distance away from the Hall containing the Figure of Frozen Time. With the artist busy tending to his exhibit, Sahana had persuaded Handolay to take her to the Figure Hall. Devesh and I contrived to join them, as did a few others from our group.

"Of course it is protected by many alarm systems," Handolay said.

Visitors were allowed no nearer than ten metres from the artefact. There was a slight shimmer to the air around it, suggesting some kind of force barrier. Surveillance equipment was clearly in evidence. He gestured towards the men standing to attention nearby, huge scimitar blades visible at their sides. "And guards."

"Glad to hear it," Devesh said.

"I wish we could go closer," Sahana said.

It was difficult to make out the finer detail. It appeared to be a kneeling figure, head upturned to the sky. It looked as if it were pleading. And shrunken, desiccated almost; it had the features of an old man, but the size of a child.

"Has the artefact always been located at this spot?" Sahana asked.

"Yes indeed, the Figure has stood at this precise location for thousands of years. This building was constructed around it. It is believed the entire city was built around it."

"That must be a legend, surely," Devesh said quietly to me.

"Perhaps," I said.

There was another woman there that first day. Her name was Cress, but I did not know that until later. She was dressed in a single piece of cloth, with a long length of cord wrapped

around her to form an extravagant patterned mesh. She knelt at the perimeter and her gaze never left the Figure. She had close-cropped hair, and a small scar on the right side of her face.

I was trying my best to take in every detail of the place. I needed to learn all I could about the security around the Figure. I also needed to establish a reason to go back there every day.

I asked Handolay, "Is it permitted to make drawings of the Figure?" My role was supposed to be organisational rather than artistic, but I had drawn constantly during my service years, in the waiting time between the fighting.

He nodded as if this was a common question, but said he would have to make enquiries with Tethselem's officials. He came to find me later that evening to tell me they would allow the drawings because it was in keeping with their artistic festival. However it would not be possible to take any of the drawings out of the city. I agreed to this, since my objective was to spend time close to the Figure, not to obtain drawings.

The festival began, bringing a further influx of visitors into Tethselem. Lalitchandra Marrow was fully occupied with promoting his sculpture. How anyone could consider Marrow's contraption to be *art* I do not know: it consisted of suspended droplets of water within a cubic frame; people could walk through the frame to disturb the droplets. Thus the act of experiencing the exhibit changed it. This was supposed to be some kind of innovation but it meant little to me.

Sahana seemed to be spending most of her time in the city's main library. We had arranged to play cards – Four-hand Xi was our regular game – but I met Devesh early for a drink in the privacy of his room.

He had been very surly since we first saw the Figure. I hoped because he had reached the same conclusion as I had. "We've wasted our time coming here," I said.

He swatted away a fly. "Why?"

"You want me to lay it out for you? The size of it, for a start, and presumably it's heavy, the security measures they have taken, and then the difficulty of getting out of the city."

A thief never moves too quickly or too obviously. Bringing attention to ourselves would only make our task more difficult, but Devesh had begun to go out under cover of darkness. He had gained entrance to the Figure Hall, tapped into the security systems and traced the power lines fuelling them.

He stared into his glass. "Who says we need to get out of the city?"

"But – "

"All we have to do is steal the Figure, and then thousands of years of history will be undone. It does not matter what happens to the Figure after that, or to us."

I frowned. "But even if the legend is true, who is to say that history will be changed for the better?"

Devesh slammed his drink back onto the table. "It could not be any worse."

I stared at him aghast, but after a moment the disbelief gave way to understanding. This, then, was what Devesh had come here to do. Not the ultimate theft, the crowning achievement for a career criminal. No, this was about the fact that we lost the war.

We sat in silence for a while. "I hadn't realised," I said at last.

"I don't think I can do it without you," he said.

I doubted we could do it at all, even accepting there was no need for us to escape afterwards.

"We'll be late for the card game," I said, which brought a crooked smile to his face.

We drained our glasses and went to join the others.

Though there was a high level of technology evident in the security measures around the Figure, the city as a whole seemed to reject technology, and reject communication with the outside world. I enjoyed exploring the streets, the bustle of the marketplace, and returned each day to the Hall containing the artefact, under the pretext of my drawings.

The woman, Cress, always came there too, kneeling for several hours before the Figure. I had asked around and been told her name but nothing more. She took no interest in me, or my drawing. She spoke to no one. Eventually I followed her from the Hall.

"Excuse me," I called after her, "may I speak to you?" She turned and looked at me but did not speak at first. "I've seen you here many times," I went on. "Does the artefact have a special significance for you?"

When eventually she did speak I was surprised that she did not have the local accent. "I have seen *you* many times," she said. "Why do *you* come here?"

"The Figure of Frozen Time is famous," I said. "Yet outsiders rarely have the opportunity to see it." The expression on her face suggested she either did not know this or found it perplexing in some way. "Or so I thought."

"I remember," she said.

The conversation was proving so stilted and difficult I found myself babbling the familiar line about the Figure: "They say if it is ever stolen, it will be as if it never existed."

"Yes, that is what *they* say; to outsiders, such as you. But the people who live here tell a different story, and I have come to see things as they do."

Now it was my turn to be perplexed. She turned away from me. "Wait!"

She paused, half-turned her head back towards me. "Perhaps, eventually, the time does come when it is right for us to forget, and to let go of the past. But if I do, and if it will then be as if it never existed – I am not sure if I am ready."

I shook my head. "I don't know what you mean."

"I know," she said. She met my eyes for the briefest moment. "I have to go now," she said. She took a few quick steps away from me.

"Perhaps we can talk again," I blurted after her.

She paused and said, "Be careful what you do next, James."

The hairs on the back of my neck stood on end, and my pulse quickened: at no point had I given her my name. I worried whether suspicion had fallen upon myself and Devesh. This was a warning, I was certain. Cress hurried away into the crowded street and disappeared from view.

That night I took advantage of our regular card game to talk to Sahana. She had unpinned her hair and wore a long emerald dress. We sat outside, enjoying a drink in the last hour of sunlight. The chirrup of the insects had quieted, and there was a

pleasant breeze for once.

"I haven't seen much of you during the days here." As opposed to the evenings, I meant, when we usually played cards. "Have you been talking with the people of Tethselem?"

She nodded. "Yes, and studying in the library."

"Is it possible, do you think, that this legend of the Figure is some kind of mistranslation?"

She paused, midway through laying a card, then continued to put it down gently. "It is entirely possible, yes."

She did not immediately say any more. Devesh took his turn.

"Why would you ask me that?" Sahana said suddenly. Almost in a whisper she went on: "This is the basis of a paper I'm writing."

"It's the only reason she came to Tethselem," Lalitchandra said.

"That is not true," she countered. "I came to support my husband, of course, but I am a historian. If I can glean some new insight into this legend it could make my name."

"And have you?" I asked. She looked very reluctant to say more. "I assure you I have no intention of writing any rival academic papers."

"I can certainly vouch for that," Devesh said, which made her laugh and broke the tension for all of us.

"I just think there is more to it," she said, talking freely now. "The earliest texts making reference to the Figure are thousands of years old. The language has changed, even in a city as removed from outside influences as Tethselem appears to be. So it is difficult to be certain about the precise meaning of those old texts."

"Have you talked to any scholars here?"

"Yes, but they talk in riddles; it is quite maddening. It is almost as if they are waiting to see what is going to happen, and are reluctant to say anything to prejudge what is to come. But the idea that the Figure might be stolen in some way is certainly a fundamental part of the legend, and of their current beliefs as far as I can determine them. But the tense used in the scriptures, and the viewpoint of the sentences, they're confusing. The notion that the Figure will never have existed is particularly troublesome. It's almost as if its never having existed is linked to some kind of penance or sacrifice."

She shook her head, apparently exasperated. The word 'penance' immediately made me think of Cress.

"There is a woman who comes to kneel before the Figure every day," I told Sahana. "I had assumed she was a local woman, but her accent indicates otherwise. I tried to talk to her but she wouldn't say much and hurried away from me. Perhaps you might have more luck?"

She smiled. "Interesting. Someone who is an outsider but immersed in the culture might be exactly the person I need to talk to. Either that or she will just confuse things even further!"

"Shall we play cards?" Lalitchandra asked.

I apologised for causing the distraction. Before we parted for the night I made arrangements with Sahana for her to come to the Figure Hall the next day so that I could point out the woman named Cress.

It crossed my mind later that perhaps Cress's cryptic warning to me had been a result of Sahana's investigations, rather than anything Devesh or I had done. It might be that we had made a

mistake by associating with Sahana Marrow.

Cress came to the Hall early the following morning. She did not show any recognition for me but behaved exactly as before. I was determined to learn more about her and followed her when she stood up and left the Hall. I wondered what had happened to Sahana but supposed she had been delayed somewhere.

"Please can I walk with you?" I asked her.

She nodded and we walked in silence for a while. The streets were very busy, with stalls selling food, people drawing water from a central pool and carrying it away in large jugs, some kind of lesson being taught to a group of children.

We were into the last few days of Tethselem's art festival. When it was over we fully expected to be asked to leave, although this was not certain. We had made enquiries to stay longer but had only been told that the matter would be considered.

"What brought you to Tethselem?" I asked.

"We came for the last festival," she said. "Five years ago. My husband and I had lost our child in a terrible accident, and we were very bitter."

"I am sorry to hear that," I said. Devesh and I had lost many friends in the war. Devesh's entire hometown had been destroyed, taking the life of his only brother.

"We had an artist friend who was invited here, and we decided to come with him," Cress said.

"And five years later you're still here." Of course I was wondering what had become of the husband and the artist.

"Yes, but I think it is time for me to leave now."

"Why now?"

We walked several paces before she replied. "I think I have grieved enough," she said.

"I see," I said, but I had the feeling I didn't really see at all. "Where will you go?"

"There is no way to know," she said.

It seemed everyone in Tethselem spoke in riddles, whether they were born here or not. But I felt that I had at least made a start with Cress, and I was reluctant to press her and possibly jeopardise the small progress I had made.

I decided to turn back. "Thank you for talking to me," I said to her. "Perhaps we can talk again tomorrow?"

She did not seem to know how to respond. At last she gave a slight nod, agreement I hoped, and walked away.

I was reluctant to go back to the Figure Hall. I thought I had learned all I was likely to about the Figure itself, and Devesh had learned all he could about the security around it. So I decided instead to try to find the library Sahana had spoken of. I purchased a bowl of stew from a market stall and asked the seller for directions.

The library building was a massive construction, with acres of space inside. With only a few stray visitors to disturb the quiet my footsteps echoed loudly as I walked through each room in search of Sahana. The air was cool, something I wished I'd known earlier, after weeks of stifling heat.

She smiled when she saw me. I sat down across the table from her. "Are we allowed to talk in here?"

"Yes," she said. "They're not strict about that."

"I thought you were coming to the Figure Hall to meet Cress." She looked blankly at me for a moment, then remembered.

"Sorry, I've been so engrossed in all this – " She gestured to the books spread out in front of her. "What time is it?"

She looked at her own watch as she said it, so I didn't bother to reply. It was late afternoon. "Found anything interesting?"

"I've been looking at descriptions of the Figure, from different time periods. There's no doubt it's the same Figure in each description. A shrunken older man, about the size of a child, kneeling, head upturned to the sky. But that relentless consistency is actually quite odd. If you were to look at the history of, say, this library, you would find that it has been rebuilt many times over. But there is never any mention of any damage to the Figure of Frozen Time, no repairs ever required. No variation in its condition. Is that even possible?"

I had to admit it seemed unlikely. "You don't think it could really be a moment frozen in time?"

She laughed, but it was a nervous laugh.

I said, "Any mention of the sculptor who made it?"

She shook her head. "These records are estimated to go back at least three thousand years. The Figure seems to exist even in the oldest of them."

I wish that I had had a chance to discuss the events of the day with Devesh, the conversations with Cress and Sahana, but I suspect it would have made little difference. We met for dinner and for our usual card game, but could not talk openly then.

On the way back to our rooms they took us. I never saw them. A bag was thrown over my head, and a needle jabbed into my arm. I felt consciousness ebbing away as my hands were bound behind my back.

When I woke my hands were still bound behind me. I sat on a chair, feeling sick and dizzy. The only light in the room came from the Figure of Frozen Time. Until then there had always been other lights on in the Hall, and I had not realised before that the Figure emitted light in this way. I wondered suddenly if the Figure was just a projected image.

I cast nervous glances to either side of me and saw that Devesh, Lalitchandra and Sahana were similarly bound and seated on chairs like mine. It appeared I was the last to reawaken. Devesh was to my left, Sahana to my right, and Lalitchandra further to her right. I could see little else at first. Then Cress stepped out of the darkness to stand in front of us.

"I have been given a little time to talk to you," she said. She sounded reluctant, but not without a certain resolve. "Five years ago when I came to Tethselem I was in the same situation as you are now."

Devesh calmly demanded to know what she wanted with us. Lalitchandra was asking the same question but with less self-control. He shouted at Cress, and called out for help. I heard a crack, a blow to the back of his head, after which he chose to stay quiet. The thought of someone behind us in the darkness waiting to club us into submission caused an adrenalin surge in me and I broke out in a cold sweat.

"Perhaps you imagine you were subtle," Cress said, "but you were watched closely from the moment you entered the city. The people of Tethselem have long propagated rumours about the Figure, which brings a certain kind of person here. People who want to change history. It was what my husband wanted, when we came here."

I looked at Cress and I asked, very calmly, "What happened to your husband?"

She pointed towards the Figure of Frozen Time. "That is my husband," she said.

I stared at the faint glow of the Figure. It could not be Cress's husband. The image had been written about for thousands of years, not just the last five.

I began to object but she said, "Imagine a tunnel of light stretching back through time for thousands of years. If you touch the beam now, the image of that moment appears within the beam throughout its entire length."

Devesh said, "Rewriting thousands of years of history?" It was phrased as a question. I could hear a sense of awe in his voice.

"Yes," Cress said. "That change happens in an instant. Other changes come later, perhaps."

I said, "I ask again, what happened to your husband?"

"You mean, where is he now? And when?" She paused, searching for the right words before continuing. "You are familiar with the idea of a black hole? At its centre, time would stand still, so anything we might see there would seem to be frozen in time. Yet it might also be a gateway to some other point in space and time. The council of Tethselem believe this is, if not a black hole, a kind of nexus point. A portal."

"And where does it lead?" Devesh asked.

"To a place where reality is shaped, where one can see all possibilities and the nexus points of creation for each of them."

I said, "A religious belief rather than a rational one, surely."

Devesh ignored me and asked, "To what end? What purpose?"

Cress sighed. "At a nexus point one can choose to go this way or that. History can be rewritten."

I said to her, "Even you do not seem convinced."

She said, "It does not matter what I believe."

I glanced at Devesh. His attention was focused solely on Cress.

It was Sahana who spoke next. "Supposing any of this is true, why would the people of Tethselem allow it? The unravelling of time and space, what possible benefit could there be?"

Cress looked thoughtful and only spoke after a long pause. "Their entire society, their view of history, of the structure of the universe, revolves around the presence of The Figure of Frozen Time in the heart of their city. They believe that any changes would be for the better. No one will choose a history that is bad for Tethselem, because they need Tethselem. They need its Figure, its dark heart."

I remembered that Tethselem had fared well in the war, and in the years since. Was this how? Cress's husband, and others before him, choosing a path that would always ensure Tethselem's survival, whilst allowing subtler changes to occur?

"Why are we here now?" Devesh asked.

"There are fluctuations in the luminance of the Figure. This indicates that my husband has made his choice. Tethselem is shifting in time and space, adjusting to its new reality."

"Why did it take so long?" I asked. "You were left here, alone for years."

Sometimes I dream of the smile she gave me then. She did not volunteer any other answer, and I suppose she had none to give. The rewriting of history, the theft of years, could such decisions as these be made in an instant?

Devesh said, "Are you offering us the same chance now?"

"The ruling council of Tethselem is offering you the chance, yes," Cress said. "You are here because they think one of you will accept. They believe you all conspired to steal the Figure."

"That is not true," Lalitchandra said.

I said, "The Figure cannot be stolen."

Cress nodded. "The word 'stolen' is a clumsy interpretation of the original scriptures. But it is true to say that the Figure is changed forever when someone new enters into its light, as my husband did. All that we know could change. Some things lost, others gained."

"I won't go," Sahana said. And there was no doubting the conviction in her voice.

Lalitchandra said the same.

"You do not have to accept," Cress said to all of us, "you do have a choice."

"I accept," Devesh said.

"Devesh!" I cried out to him, appalled that my oldest friend would entertain such foolishness.

Devesh managed a shrug, despite his hands being bound behind his back. "I am done with living in *this* world."

Cress moved to stand in front of Devesh. "Are you sure?" she asked him. "My daughter died, and I do not know if this will change. It has been hard to come to terms with it; harder still because I came here and I lost my husband, too."

"I'm sure," Devesh said. "I want to go."

I heard a rasping sound; I think it was a knife cutting through Devesh's bonds. Then his hands were free and he stood up.

I called out, "If he goes, will I even remember him?"

Cress said, "For now, yes. But if he chooses another path for all of us, then that might change."

I turned my head to Devesh. "Please, my friend, do not do this."

He came over to me and whispered into my ear. I knew then that I could not dissuade him. Cress told him what to do. He walked up to the Figure and stepped inside it. He did not fall to his knees, as Cress's husband had. He stayed on his feet and threw his shoulders back. I was very proud of him for that, even as the life seemed to be sucked out of his frail human shell and he visibly shrank as if being pulled away into the distance of time. He twisted his head to make eye contact with me one last time and then froze in that position.

I saw a shimmer in the air around the Figure and realised the force barrier had been reinstated. The rest of us would be prevented from approaching it. I understood then that the barrier's purpose was to protect the visitors who came here, rather than to safeguard the Figure.

"Devesh," I whispered. Then I felt the needle injection into my arm, and the next I knew was waking up back in my room.

At Sahana's request I visited the library a few days later. She showed me the same books she had shown me before. At least, they appeared to be the same books, but every description of the Figure of Frozen Time was different to the one I had read before. The description was of a standing figure, with shoulders back, head held steady as if looking towards a friend. Shrunken, desiccated almost, the features of an old man, but the size of a child.

All of my drawings of the Figure had vanished on the night

of the abduction. Whether they were stolen or simply ceased to exist, I didn't know. My memory of drawing them seemed hazy, confused.

"Will you write your academic paper now?" I asked.

She closed each of the books, one by one. "No. I do not think so. I would rather the world never heard of Tethselem. I would rather that our history could not be changed so easily. The fewer people come here the better."

I smiled.

"Lalitchandra and I are leaving today," she said. "Please come with us."

I shook my head, and she did not question it. We embraced briefly. I did not expect to ever see her again.

I walked back in the direction of the Figure Hall, as I had every day since that night. As I would no doubt continue to do. I knelt before his figure, stared into his face and asked myself whether anything could possibly be gained by his sacrifice.

"Do not visit me every day." These were the words Devesh had whispered into my ear, his final words to me. But I would do, at least for now. Perhaps if I prayed for him, if I were humble enough and repented my life, then the Gods might smile upon him, and upon us all.

"Excuse me," a voice said, "may I speak to you?" I turned and looked at her and I fear my mouth fell open with surprise. "I've seen you here three days running," she went on. "Does the Figure have a special significance for you?"

It was Cress, but she did not appear to know me. "It does," I said. "It is an echo of someone who meant a great deal to me."

She smiled, shaking her head. "Everyone in Tethselem speaks in riddles," she said.

"I used to think so, too," I said. "Are you staying long in Tethselem?"

"No," she said. "I am just here for the festival."

"I hope you enjoy it," I said. "And I wish you every happiness in life."

She seemed surprised by my graciousness. "We haven't met before, have we?"

I shook my head, because a truthful answer would have taken far too much explanation.

Someone called to her. She said goodbye to me and drifted away to join him. The image I had seen of her husband in the Figure of Frozen Time had been shrunken and deformed, so it was hard to tell, but I did not think it could be the same man.

I walked out into the sunlight and took a long stroll through the streets of Tethselem. Once I was a thief, but now I am just a man who will remember his friend for as many days as fate and destiny allow. The city seems to stand outside of time, every day much like any other. Vast changes could be taking place beyond its walls and I might never know.

I remember that we fought a war and we lost. There will come a day, though it might be years from now, when I will have to leave the city of Tethselem and discover if any of it is still true.

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Chris Butler lives and writes on the south coast of England. He has a fantasy garden where he observes foxes and harvests grapes. His published stories include the novel *Any Time Now*, and short fiction in *Asimov's*, *Nature*, *Albedo One* and this is his third for *Interzone* following 'The Smart Minefield' in #185 and 'Cuckoo' in #191. Visit Chris at chris-butler.co.uk.

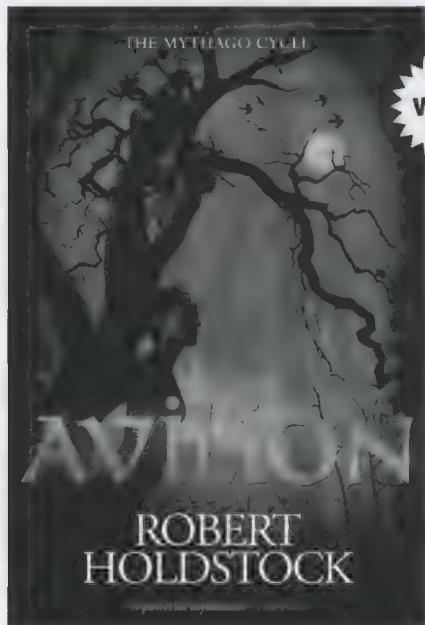
BOOKS

# REVIEWS

Books 50–57 Films 58–61 DVDs/Blu-rays 62–64



## Book Zone Book Reviews & Interviews



### **AVILION**

**Robert Holdstock**

Gollancz, 341pp, £12.99 tpb

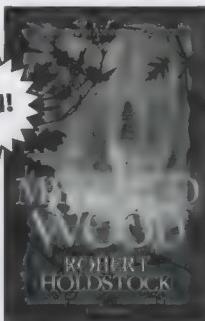
#### **Review & Interview by Sandy Auden**

**Full of haunting landscapes and mythological icons, this sequel to *Mythago Wood* has been a long time coming but it has been worth the wait. Embracing many of the themes featured in the *Mythago* novels, *Avilion* delivers a thoughtful and imaginative continuation of the Huxley family story.**

Steven Huxley (son of George from book one) has settled down to life in a villa in the middle of the mysterious Ryhope Wood. After the return of his lover Guiwenneth from the afterlife, they've set up home and raised two children, Jack and Yssobel. The villa is a crossing place, a location where the strange mythago constructs – made by the wood from the subconscious memories of its inhabitants – can visit and rest before continuing their journey. But there is someone coming who is not welcome. Steven's dead brother Christian is increasingly haunting Yssobel's dreams and his memory is gaining substance in the magical environs of the Ryhope.

The arrival of Legion, a huge army of the dead, is the catalyst that splits the Huxley family apart. Guiwenneth leaves the villa with Legion, to find Christian and take her revenge for his abuse in the past. Yssobel disappears soon after, desperate to bring her mother home; and Jack, knowing his sister

**WIN!**



"It came as a shock to realise that 2009 is the 25th anniversary of *Mythago Wood*, the novel I wrote from my dreams, and under the influence of my grandfather's eerie tales, told to me when I was a child. I loved his stories: frightening and vivid. They shaped me."

Courtesy of Gollancz we are offering three readers the opportunity to win a copy of the 25th anniversary edition of *Mythago Wood* and its sequel *Avilion*. Simply email your name and postal address to [iz224competitions@ttapress.com](mailto:iz224competitions@ttapress.com), using *Mythago Wood* as your subject line, before the closing date of October 9th. Winners will be announced on the forum.

to be in danger, ventures to the settlement at the edge of the forest to ask the shade of his grandfather for help to find her.

Their individual journeys through Ryhope will leave them all changed, and not necessarily for the better.

Searching for a loved one in the heart of Ryhope Wood is a common theme that links many of the books in Holdstock's series. This time though the searchers are not entirely human, if at all. Guiwenneth is pure mythago, a construct of Steven's subconscious, given life by the Wood and possessing the insight of her 'green' nature. Jack and Yssobel are half mythago and half human, mixing the 'red' and the 'green' in equal parts, giving them a unique double-sided perception of the world around them. And that world forces them to grow up and change as their adventures progress.

Along with this coming of age theme, Holdstock weaves in a complex range of concepts – identity, family, memory and death, resurrection, afterlife and destiny – until it seems that all the actions of the protagonists have an underlying hidden meaning. Indeed, symbolism seems to be everywhere within the story as Holdstock draws inspiration from the deep well of Celtic mythology with Arthur and the Mabinogion's Peredur (with a little Greek mixed in for good measure in the form of Odysseus).

That symbolism is heightened with Holdstock's use of structure. Opening with Jack's return to the edge of the forest and his grandfather's old home at Oak Lodge, the story then goes back in time to explain why he made the journey, before continuing forward to change perspective and draw the reader away from purely linear concepts. Hal Duncan's fantasies *Vellum* and *Ink* used a similar approach but the free association that Duncan used isn't as strong here and the story is easier to follow. Holdstock never confuses,

just loosens the mind from more rigid perceptions.

All this is probably an intentional effect generated by the author. The *Mythago* series has always been an exploration of the Jungian concept of collective unconsciousness and race memory and as Joseph Campbell writes in *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*: "In the absence of an effective general mythology, each of us has his private, unrecognised, rudimentary yet secretly potent pantheon of dream." It is this pantheon that Holdstock touches in his stories.

Other fictions like Stephen Gallagher's *Oktober* acknowledge the existence of the collective unconsciousness then use it as a mechanism to achieve an end result. In Holdstock's fiction, the collective unconscious is the landscape that the characters journey through – they are both influenced by that landscape and are changed by it.

As atmospheric and fascinating as it is, *Avilion* does occasionally suffer from being simply several stories about searching for a loved one who doesn't appear to be in any danger at all. When the danger finally threatens, it strikes quickly and fatally, leading to an unexpected conclusion that is surprisingly satisfying. This is a suitably deep and thoughtful return to Ryhope Wood, let's hope it's not the last.

**It's been some time since your last visit to Ryhope Wood. What sparked the return journey?**

I wanted to return to 'mythago' after three books in *The Merlin Codex*, which took me so much out of time, and into the mind of a man who is a reflection of me, with all his weaknesses and strengths, but so much alive and on so huge a journey that I became exhausted. I wasn't returning so much to Ryhope Wood, but to love and the loss of life: the consequences of a sexual

relationship between a man and a green woman (Steven and Guiwenneth).

The epigraph of *Avilion* reads: *The ghost is as the man* (a line from Tennyson's great poem about Arthur).

What was once powerful is now a shadow. Yet the shadows that were cast, by the shadow of love, are now powerful. All that we once had, we had. All that we have we have, and we give. All that will come to us is the feast – and if it's leftovers, you haven't lived!

I needed to get back to love, and the original sort of mystery that underlies *Mythago Wood* itself.

#### **How did it feel re-entering the wood?**

Much as it feels re-entering *anything* that has been a joy, and still is. You have come to know the place, its music, its scent, its changes. The path might be different, but the sunlit glades are the same, and the joy and the laughter and the strangeness and the encounters with old thought and new... those are the joys.

#### **How did it differ from your last visit?**

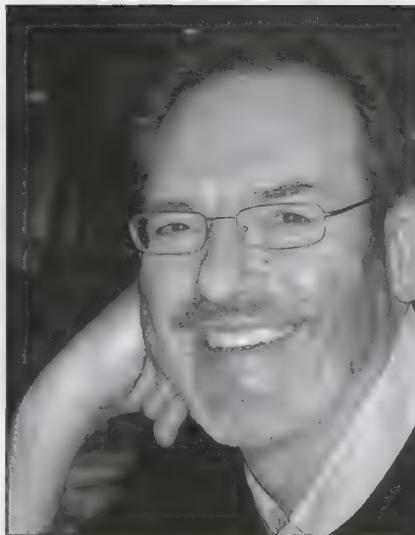
New pleasures, new encounters; the chance to change style. To get with poetry. To make rhyme speak within the context of prose. To have some fun with Odysseus as a youth. To introduce myself politely to characters from myth, and characters from Hell itself (the Crow-battle goddesses, Narine and Uzana; I love them. Take my soul anytime, ladies). And of course, the gorgeous and the wonderful Yssobel: more 'Green of the Wood' than 'Red of the Blood'.

#### **Why did you decide to tell this story through Steven and Gwin's children?**

Because of the conflict between the woodland side of them (*mythago*) and the human side of them (their father), and to explore what conflicts would arise as they became adults, and where would their – quite literally – *nature* take them? In opposite directions. That is why there are two stories interwoven. There had to be. And because there were two stories in one, I could change viewpoint; and because Time past and Time future (check out T.S. Elliot for the reference) were part of the plot, I could change voice between chapters, scenes, characters. Work and play! But I loved writing about those two kids grown-up.

#### **Which offspring was the most enjoyable to write?**

Definitely Yssobel. I'm a bloke. What



answer did you expect? Jack's cool, but Yssobel is strong, funny – beautiful, yes; her mother's child; angry, determined, a woman who will go through fire for what she loves, and welcomes love like a warm fire on a winter's night. She glows in my mind. I wish she were real. I loved writing about her, her art, her dreadful poetry (though she writes it to tease her brother), her confusion about her past, and the way, when she loses, she sets off to gain and takes her own life into her hands. Such a strong woman. My sort of woman.

#### **Do you think this type of Jungian collective consciousness you explore in your book actually exists?**

Absolutely. Cave art across the ages, art across the ages, passion for expression across the ages, the cultures...are the same; we share in our minds something so old, so beautiful, that it truly inhabits us; we are programmed to think the same; therefore we share both the beauty and, alas, the hate and the anger and that stupid religious shit that drives too many of us

#### **How important are the themes of identity, family, memory and afterlife to your stories and to you personally?**

I could write a PhD thesis on this. Answer (short): *Very*. Answer (slightly longer): Let's get it clear right now. There is no afterlife. OK? I'm a Dawkins man, a Darwin Man, not a chanting, singing, incense-swinging church man.

The myth that is behind all religions is wonderful. It speaks of the early mind, the growing of consciousness (conscience comes later), the way language came to inhabit not just the human culture but the humanity and the distress of love. All myth

is religion, all religion is myth. Love it.

Family memory is the great loss that many of us feel when the family member is lost, and the memory is lost, and the story, the struggle, the love, the fun, the wonderful anecdotes, the shifting and turning as their lives went around and around – round the world, perhaps; round no more than southern England, perhaps... or the Somme...and now Afghanistan...

So yes...memory and family are the treasure that we have briefly and my work – for what it's worth – really dives in to that, head first, no apologies. Every scrap of memory I have of my grandparents (the bits they would have approved of) is being used, and I love them from a distance that now seems almost yesterday. They live. Photography and memory does that! They smile out of smooth-skinned faces, eyes bright, all the senses sharp. They are young ones who went before.

Identity! Here's the rub.

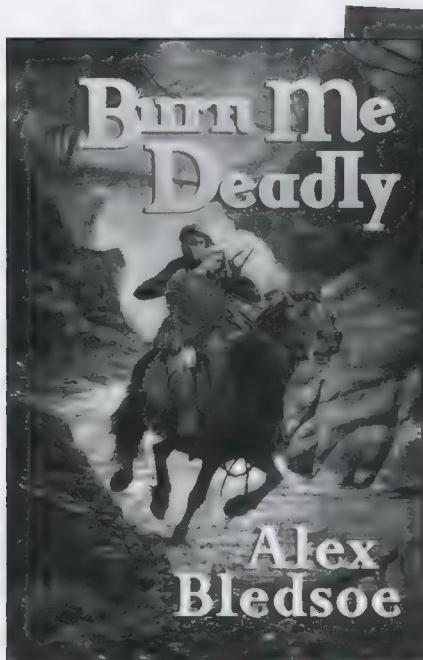
Yssobel and Jack, in *Avilion*, are torn between two natures. But why does the idea of identity so appeal to me (and to others writers, of course)? Is it because we don't think of ourselves, now, as 'whatever' from 'wherever' born 'whenever'? Because I don't. Yes, I was born in Kent, UK; but, English? Am I? My name is Haaldestokke. I'm Dutch. Before that, what? My ancestor (also Robert) came from Holland in 1560 to help build the sea defences along the Kent coast (the old coast of the Cantii; later inhabited by the Yute, from Yuteland – Jutland). I am all, I am me.

Identity? Maybe it comes down to trying to identify why we *try* to identify – instead of just getting on with it.

My characters often reflect a confusion, not so much as to who they are, but as to what empowers them, what enables them. They are their own lives. Their identity is their own. It's not what the chromosome has done for them, it's what the song will do for them.

#### **Why have you created such harsh and punishing journeys for your characters?**

Because life ain't easy. And if I'm spending two years writing about them, they have to give me some payback. And I like 'harsh and punishing'. (I slightly prefer harsh.) But they get to laugh, drink ale, eat interesting forest food, meet ancient heroes, have good adventure in unexpected places, have kisses (many kisses), and naturally, with my new obsession, tell poetry to each other. But only when they're not being harshed and punished.

**BURN ME DEADLY****Alex Bledsoe**

Tor, 320pp, £17.99 hb

**Reviewed by Ian Hunter**

**While Simon Green is currently blending** the spy or espionage novel with fantasy, and Liz Williams Detective Chen series takes the buddy movie and the police procedural and slaps them right into the eternal battle between heaven and hell, Alex Bledsoe is doing something different. He's taking elements of the hardboiled detective novel and mixing it with sword and sorcery and possibly adding a smattering of the western into the mix.

*Burn Me Deadly* is the second Eddie LaCrosse novel, the sequel to *The Sword-Edged Blonde*, and La Crosse isn't a private detective, private dick, or even private eye, he's a sword jockey. Quick with his wits and his sword, his dagger, and his fists, and willing to put them all at your disposal for a price. He's getting over-the-hill, a bit cynical and world weary, but still quite happy to ply his trade out of an office above Angelina's tavern which comes across more like a saloon in Tombstone than belonging to a fantasy world. Eddie has a past as a minor nobleman which he's trying to live down; and a big secret that he's keeping from Liz, the love of his life, namely that he was there when her twin sister was beheaded in the bath!

Bledsoe is, obviously, riffing off Mickey Spillane's 1952 novel *Kiss Me Deadly*, as well as the classic 1955 noir movie adaption directed by Robert Aldrich, starring Ralph



► cover may change by November 2nd publication

Meeker as a quite thuggish and bullying, and blackmailing, Mike Hammer. Both the book and the movie start with Hammer rescuing a damsel in distress only for them to be waylaid and Hammer drifts in and out of consciousness while the woman is tortured to death. The bad guys decide to bump off Hammer, but he survives, a big mistake for them.

Likewise, Eddie rescues a half-naked blonde on his way back home from a 'delivery job', and they are waylaid and she is killed and he is thrown off a cliff along with his horse, and barely manages to survive. Now he has a crime to solve and a woman, and a horse, to avenge.

The Spillane novel is about a mafia conspiracy. The film – brilliantly – is about a mysterious box – "the great whatsis" – that glows when opened, and that glow burns. What Bledsoe does here is take the best of both worlds and blends in the mafia and the cops and the Feds from Spillane's original novel, but has them as ruthless soldiers playing political games, inept royalty and outlaw gangs; and combines them with the movie plot. So there are mysterious empty lead-lined boxes, and strange cults and religions, and people looking for something that glows and burns and may be underground.

I have to confess that Bledsoe had me completely suckered until almost the end, thinking too much about what Mike Hammer finds and not what Eddie LaCrosse is looking for. LaCrosse carries a bobby trapped sword that ought to say ACME on it, and he's no Mike Hammer, more Jim Rockford, or even, dare I say it, Dean Martin as Matt Helm. Never really shaken or stirred and not to be taken too seriously, but a smooth operator with a twinkle in his eye, and a safe pair of hands to see you to the end of this book, and into the next one.

**MISTAKING THE NATURE OF THE POSTHUMAN****Steve Sneyd**

Hilltop Press, 112pp, £6.99 pb

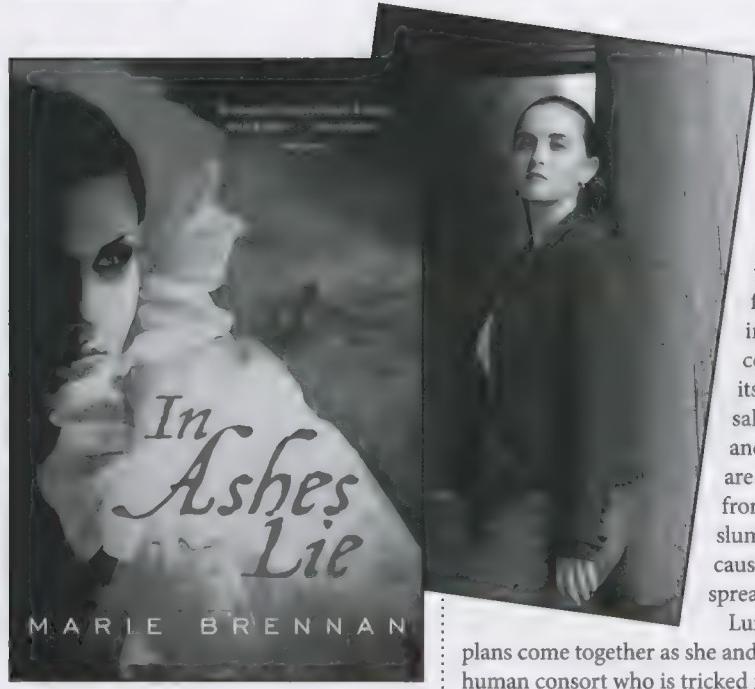
**Reviewed by Paul Graham Raven**

If poetry in general is a niche art with values inscrutable to outsiders, then perhaps science fiction poetry is doubly so. Treated with disdain by the mainstream surrounding it (except when favoured poets make forays into its territory, at which point the reassessments of genre so familiar from reviews of sf novels by otherwise mainstream writers are deployed – "it's not *really* science fiction, it's too good for that"), it revels in its own stylistic code, uncaring, its back turned on fashion.

End result: science fiction poetry is rarely an easy read, emotionally or mechanically, and Steve Sneyd's work as collected here illustrates that point perfectly. It is reminiscent of the concrete-phase sf poetry of Edwin Morgan, combined with a Cummings-like allergy to punctuation and a pathological avoidance of pronouns; there are no chime-rhyming stanzas or trite metaphors to be found. Instead, Sneyd favours distinctive but difficult voices, seemingly tapping into them at the level of subvocalisation rather than conscious utterance; some say that poetry is both for the ear and for the eye, but Sneyd's material leans heavily toward being a visual experience first and foremost.

Sneyd asks the same big questions about humanity and its place in the universe that the more ponderous sf novelists tend to favour, adding another layer of challenge to his work. One-off time travellers pine for another trip to the future; artificial consciousnesses agonise over their contradictory existences as slaves of their creators; a girl with psychic powers turns a lover's orgasm into a gruesome and ironic not-so-little death; spaceship crews stoically accept the random cullings demanded by the caprice of the universe in exchange for the ability to voyage. There is much depth and philosophy to Sneyd's poems; dark beauty awaits those willing to put their backs into the solitary work of prospecting for it.

All Hilltop Press Publications  
(and many other independent publications) can be ordered from  
Chris Reed at [bbr-online.com/catalogue](http://bbr-online.com/catalogue)

**IN ASHES LIE****Marie Brennan**

Orbit, 464pp, £7.99 pb

**Reviewed by Iain Emsley**

Marie Brennan's *In Ashes Lie* is the second novel to feature Lune who is struggling to keep the balance between the humans and the fey. The first novel, *Midnight Never Come*, used the Spanish Armada as the backdrop for the imbalance in the human and supernatural worlds. As Shakespeare muses on in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the mortal and fey worlds are intertwined at a root level. Although neither may be fully aware of the other, there is an intimate link and conflict in one that will affect the other. The book is split into two main time lines starting with the Civil War and moving to the Plague and Fire of London, moving from collapse to restoration.

Moving ahead 60 years from the Armada to the beginning of the Civil War, the Onyx Hall finds itself under attack from Vidar who ousts Lune from the throne. As mortal parties gather around the Roundheads and Cavaliers, Lune needs to find allies from the native fey of Scotland and Ireland, as well as find ways of introducing new weapons to the arsenal. As the New Model Army allows Cromwell to take power, so the introduction of firearms allows the retaking of the throne.

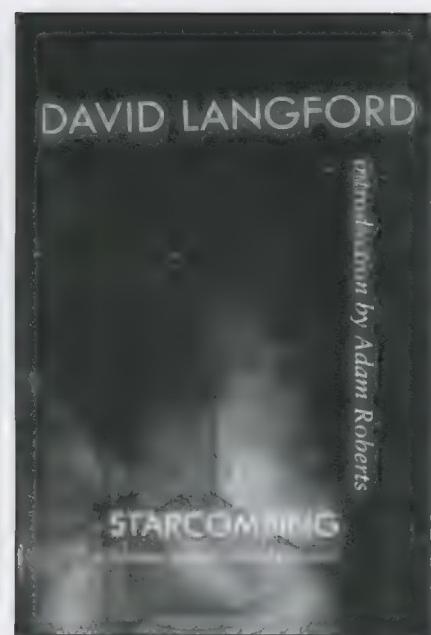
As the Plague ravages across the city, Lune strikes a bargain to provide some protection against the disease in exchange for some bread to stop the supernatural

beings from starving. A year later, as a small spark causes the great fire, the imbalance comes to its head as salamanders and a dragon are awoken from their slumber and cause the fire to spread.

Lune's long laid plans come together as she and Jack, her human consort who is tricked into being bound to the supernatural through drink, chase the dragon through the City whilst the inhabitants try to stop the fire. Starting by calling the Thames to quench the flames, she becomes the protector of the London Stone, realising and maintaining the link between the two worlds and cities. Despite the restoration of her throne through the defeat of Vidar, Brennan finds a medieval balance is needed: one between the humours. In a sense the land echoes the view of the body in that it needs to be maintained, not only restored but also kept in balance. Restoration is not only through the return of the Queen but in finding the balance again between the worlds.

Brennan keeps the times going and balances the worlds, switching between the courts and the progress made. She subtly mixes magic and science without an undue sense of shoehorning the two together. Likewise with the choice of the historical periods in which she articulates the fear and uncertainty and uses this as a silent backdrop to the political story line. The novel does not have too many things thrown in to it, though it is busy, and keeps its learning quiet. Helpfully Brennan does include some notes to explain one or two things, which can jar, but they are not a necessity.

There are some great expansions and twists on the fairy lore to make it relevant and fun. Well paced and with rounded characters, *In Ashes Lie* is a fantastic second novel that is not reliant on the reader knowing the first book. This series is shaping up to be one to wait for each instalment expectantly.

**DAVID LANGFORD***Introduction by Adam Roberts***STARCOMBING****David Langford**

Cosmos Books, 236pp, \$29.95 hb/\$14.95 tpb

**Reviewed by Ian Sales**

David Langford is a British institution. I picture him as resembling a faculty building in a concrete-and-glass university campus of the 1950s, possessing neither Gothic grandeur, nor the ivy-clad and leather-elbowed academic elitism of a red-brick. And certainly not the imposing belligerence of a Brutalist edifice. Rather, an unassuming but welcoming façade, one which would not look out of place in a city-centre precinct, one which speaks of learning that is open and available to all. Within the building, with its foyer lined with twenty-eight Hugo Awards, is a labyrinth of passages. Small signposts indicate the ways of 'science fiction', 'literature', 'nuclear physics', 'Thog's Masterclass', 'Harry Potter' and other areas of knowledge. The corridors are quiet, and those who pad their lengths do so silently. Every so often, a door can be heard softly closing.

There is an atmosphere of erudition and wit – the halls are thick with it. And it is said, in hushed tones naturally, that in the labyrinth can be found a vast library, containing many legendary arcane tomes. The library is searchable too, by means of an elegant user interface programmed by the man himself.

At semi-irregular intervals, Langford issues prospectuses. *Starcombing* is the most recent. It contains eighty-five

articles, drawn from a variety of sources – *Foundation*, SFX, *The New York Review of Science Fiction*, *Nature* and *Nature Physics*, assorted fanzines, and even some previously unpublished pieces. The earliest is from 2000, and the latest from earlier this year. They are arranged chronologically. An author's note describes *Starcombing* as a sequel to both *Up Through an Empty House of Stars* (2003) and *The Sex Column* (2005), both previous collections of Langford's writings.

*Starcombing* is a book in which one should wander around; a plan is not necessary. Nor, in this labyrinth, a thread, narrative or otherwise. Alternatively, there is the index, which signposts the route directly to whatever is sought. Some might consider that cheating... because this is a book in which aimlessness is an advantage, in which dipping in and out is a valid use of it.

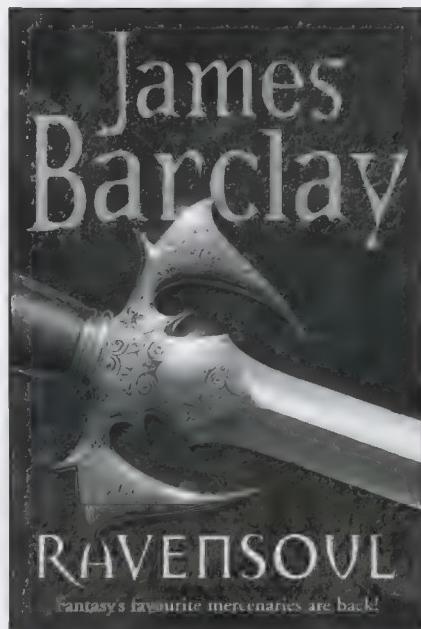
The articles *Starcombing* contains are short, often no more than a page or two. They can be read as and when desired. Not that Langford's writing needs to be taken in small doses. On the contrary, his writing has always made it appear as if his learning and humour came easily to him.

Highlights of *Starcombing* include 'Maps of Minnesota: Stalking John Sladek', a piece from *The New York Review of Science Fiction* in 2001 about tracking down Sladek's unpublished stories and poems for a posthumous collection; three previously unpublished essays from 2004 on James Branch Cabell, John Myers Myers and Thorne Smith for a project which was abandoned by its editor; an essay on H.G. Wells from *Fortean Times*; and four short-short stories from *Nature* and *Nature Physics*. I suspect I am not alone in wishing Langford would write more, and longer, fiction.

Much of *Starcombing* comprises Langford's column from SFX and, while they are entertaining, their nature, intended audience and shortness weighs against them.

If I have one complaint, it's that the contents page does not give the origin of the various articles; it is only given as bulleted note after each piece.

Those familiar with Langford's writing will know what to expect from *Starcombing*, and probably already have their copies on order. Those who have yet to read Langford should begin immediately, and *Starcombing* provides as good an introduction as any of his non-fiction collections.



#### RAVENSOUl

**James Barclay**

Gollancz, 448pp, £7.99 pb

**Reviewed by Sandy Auden**

'Muscular heroes engaged in violent conflict with villains possessing supernatural powers'. That's one definition of Sword and Sorcery and Barclay's latest Raven novel fits the mould nicely with a couple of extra modifications: the ageing members of the Raven mercenary band are dealing with arthritic hips and the like, while the dead ones are borrowing bodies to walk among the living once more.

It's ten years after the Demon wars raged across Balaia and the two remaining members of the Raven, Sol and Denser, have spent the decade rebuilding their land. But a series of nightmares about the dead members of the Raven heralds the actual return of their friends, all wearing someone else's body. At the same time, reports come in of a mass Elven exodus from their homeland on Calaius, followed by news of an attack by strange machines on the edge of Balaia. The invaders are the Garonin and they're stripping the mana (magical energy) from the land. They're heading towards each of the Colleges, where a 'heart' of magic focuses mana for Balaia's mages to use. As the Colleges fall before the seemingly all-powerful Garonin, the Raven want to move Balaia's population to a new dimension. But the other dimensions are also under attack and when the Raven are betrayed by a trusted friend, they find themselves trapped and staring

death squarely in the face...

It's not unusual for the Raven to find themselves in precarious situations and indeed *Ravensoul* has all the features you look forward to. For starters, it's brimming with action. Barclay doesn't waste time setting the scene so by chapter one the attacks are already underway and the departed Raven souls are taking over the bodies of the recently dead. The relentless advance of the Garonin leaves little time to pause – a situation that gives the story a palpable sense of tension throughout.

The stakes are high again too, as the fate of the whole of Balaia and Calaius hangs in the balance along with the dragon dimension of Beshara. Barclay has always created an all-or-nothing feel in his stories, ever since the Dawnthief spell was cast in the very first Raven novel. *Dawnthief* also introduced the strong sense of family between the Raven. Loyalty has always been important, as has the ability for the Raven to be more than the sum of their parts. Even when members of their band are killed during the journey – and Barclay has never backed away from murdering anyone in his books – they've stuck together, supporting each other, sharing cutting banter and rather black humour.

Outside of the Raven band, people are dying in their thousands again. This kind of death toll can be found in more than just Barclay's Raven stories, it's in his Ascendant adventures in *Cry of the Newborn* and *Shout for the Dead*, where other reanimated cadavers are walking. But there's nothing in *Ravensoul* that challenges the wholesale slaughter witnessed in *Demonstorm* and, frankly, that's not a bad thing.

There is only one noticeable difference in *Ravensoul* compared to his earlier stories. This one is far more claustrophobic than before. Normally, the characters are off romping around Balaia leaving a gore-strewn trail of dismembered enemies behind them while they battle to fulfill their quest. Here, they're confined mostly to the city limits of Xetesk, with the action at close quarters in narrow streets or in the catacombs beneath the College. Even the imposing eight-foot height of the Garonin warriors adds to the feelings of restriction.

As the Garonin close in, that claustrophobia intensifies, forcing the Raven into desperate measures. The conclusion gives both a fitting wrap to the story and leaves a slim possibility for further adventures and it's strangely comforting to know that this might not be the last time the Raven will fight together.

**MOXYLAND****Lauren Beukes**

Angry Robot, 307pp, £7.99 tpb

**Reviewed by John Howard**

**South Africa in less than a decade's time:** although apartheid was abolished, the population still effectively lives under various forms of segregation. New forms of apartness are defined more by location and employment (and lack of it) rather than race. If you live in a city and can get a job with a corporation, and play by their rules, you have the chance to live at least reasonably well. If not, then life can be much more problematical. Communication and networking technology has also developed to the point – not far off right now – where not to be connected to phone networks and the internet can amount to a form of non-personhood. Just about the worst thing that could happen is to be disconnected – which is frequently invoked as a punishment.

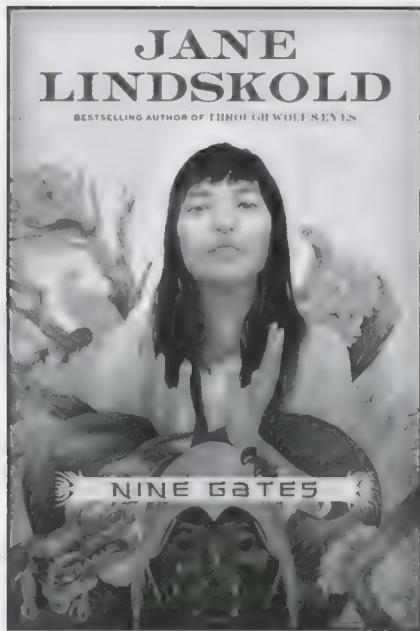
Lauren Beukes' first novel concerns four people ranging in age from teens to early thirties, who are as completely wired into the various nets as it is possible to be. Physically their lives and worlds are separate tracks, meeting mainly through cyberspace and over their phones. Tendeka is involved in schemes to help street kids, but is also caught up with Toby in low-level action against corporations: sabotaging their advertisement signs and the like. Lerato works for a corporation, sometimes barely holding on to her job as younger employees rise up behind and overtake her.

She is not always grateful to her employers. And Kendra is a struggling artist, who may or may not be about to stage her breakthrough exhibition.

The lives of the four converge and diverge in a variety of planned and unplanned ways, with planned and unplanned consequences. The total ease of being able to communicate instantly, the ubiquity of the necessary technology offers numerous opportunities to wannabe malcontents. The ever-present corporate and state surveillance makes them risk disconnection – or worse. When a successful sabotage operation leads to a scaling up of the protesters' activities, the four are snared in a tangle of events that rapidly moves beyond their control (if they were ever much more than manipulated puppets anyway) and which leaves them in more danger than they ever imagined.

*Moxyland* isn't the startling novel that the publishers would like us to think it is. It doesn't bring much new to the high tech and low life party that's been going on since at least John Brunner's *Stand on Zanzibar* (1969) and *The Shockwave Rider* (1975). One cause of tension throughout is that it isn't clear how YA *Moxyland* is supposed to be, if it is at all. Some of the narrative strands involving the older characters would be odd in a YA novel. And for an adult reader the younger characters often come across as no more than gauche and shallow, with irritating narrative voices and predictable opinions, completely conforming to the worst stereotypes. (In particular Toby is portrayed as a thoroughly annoying poor little rich boy, and at one point it is almost a delight to condone violence and agree with relief that he fully deserves the knockout punch in the face he gets from one of his exasperated friends.)

Nevertheless: the South Africa setting (and Cape Town in particular) makes a welcome change, even if Beukes doesn't always successfully convey its distinctiveness. The action could take place in any large city divided between a population consisting of them and us, rich and poor (insert any others which apply). But this is also one of the issues raised when a story is set in a globalising society, and it's a valid one. The tensions of the novel stimulate as well as aggravate. *Moxyland* keeps the pages turning and the interest going. The reader comes to react with the characters, their situations and the decisions they make. The author doesn't spare her flawed creations, either. Which is another good sign, with hopefully more to come.

**NINE GATES****Jane Lindskold**

Tor, 399pp, \$24.95 tpb

**Reviewed by Vikki Green**

*Nine Gates* seems to be the second book in a series. It took me a little while to get into the story as so much appears to have been said in the previous volume, *Thirteen Orphans*. However, I enjoyed *Nine Gates* once I'd got over the initial unfamiliarity with its world.

The root mythology for *Nine Gates* is Chinese and it is refreshing to read some fantasy that isn't set in the default Medieval or Celtic milieu. According to the world of *Nine Gates*, there is the everyday, normal world and there is another one that exists alongside it. The Lands of Smoke and Sacrifice came into existence when the First Emperor of China, Chin Shi Huang Di, had all the books he deemed unnecessary burned and all the scholars murdered. Our world is the Land of Burning, although it's hinted in the course of the action that there are more worlds out there, and not all are Chinese in origin.

The two worlds collided when the *Thirteen Orphans* were exiled from the Lands and crossed to our world a century before the action starts. In crossing over they destabilised the indigenous traditions, including the Chinese ones. The original *Thirteen Orphans* undertook to keep their magic separate and they would only use it to protect themselves or this world from threats from the Lands. Each Orphan represents an animal of the Zodiac and

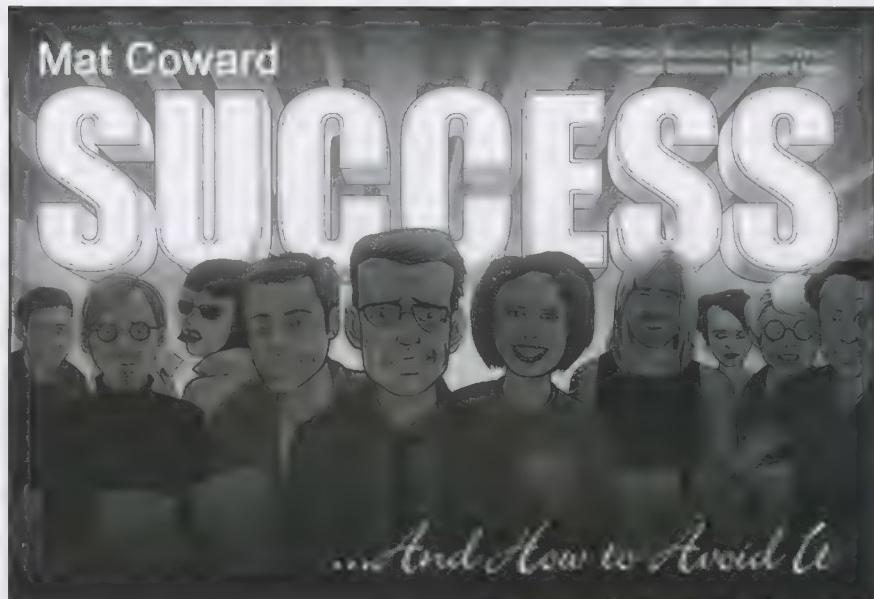
also one of the Earthly Branches. The Thirteenth Orphan is the Cat, the Emperor. Over the century some have abandoned their calling, while others have passed it on to their heirs.

When *Nine Gates* opens the eight remaining Thirteen Orphans have struck an uneasy alliance with the Dragon (Righteous Drum), Snake (Honey Dream), Monkey (Waking Lizard), and Tiger (Flying Claw). It appears the four mythical creatures had crossed to our world to force the Thirteen Orphans to transfer their power to them, and it seems that their power was not as concentrated as the original Thirteen Orphans' as they did not have the necessary hereditary background to wield the power their position as Imperial advisers required. However, during their attack something bigger takes over in the Lands and they too are exiled. They joined forces with the Thirteen Orphans to tackle this larger threat.

The three main characters in *Nine Gates* are Brenda Morris, whose father is the current Rat; Pearl Bright, the current Tiger; and Honey Dream, the Snake from the Lands of Smoke and Sacrifice. Brenda was caught up with the events of the last volume and is now an apprentice, which allows a lot of explanation to be done without it seeming clumsy. Pearl is the tactician and manipulator who lays out the strategies the Thirteen need to follow in order to re-open access to the Lands of Smoke and Sacrifice from this world. She also deals with threats to the Thirteen from forces in this world. Honey Dream has an ambivalent point of view, her cultural dislocation is tangible, and her jealousy towards Brenda makes her an unreliable narrator at best. She is also dismissive of the way the Orphans have encoded their magic in their family mahjong sets, along with the Orphans themselves.

*Nine Gates* is an absorbing read and I couldn't put it down. The story twists and turns from a straightforward returning-home story to the realisation that there is something malignant manipulating the fighting in the Lands that needs to be tackled.

The details of the Guardian Territories evoked in the story are realised beautifully. I was impressed with the sequence involving the journey to the Nine Yellow Springs and Pai Hu, the Guardian of the West. I found it a tense read, refreshing and enjoyable. I'm going to be on the lookout for the next volume as *Nine Gates* ended with the promise of more to come.



There are thousands of books for writers and would-be writers. Some of them are even useful. But a lot more people make a living writing Howtorite books than make a living as a result of them. The 'How To Make A Million With Your Pen In Four Easy Lessons' guide is part of a huge, rich, somewhat distasteful industry, based on two well-known facts about human nature:

**Everyone who can write a shopping list thinks they could write a book**

**Everyone who thinks they could write a book thinks they should write a book**

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**FROM THE MAKERS OF INTERZONE**

## Mutant Popcorn Nick Lowe



**Adapting The Time Traveler's Wife** for film has to have been the most envied gig in screenwriting: a bulletproof concept, a technically irresistible narrative engine, some cracking plot points, and a source novel that shattered the glass ceiling of genre readership to recruit a phenomenal all-ages female following for what is at base an unapologetically old-fashioned sf romance. Audrey Niffenegger's asynchronous weepie has a timeless quality of its own, with a 24-carat premise that could have been cooked up at any point in the previous fifty years, and indeed in most of its essentials has been – most conspicuously in *The Door into Summer*, *Somewhere in Time*, and Tiptree's 'Forever to a Hudson Bay Blanket'. But in an unfortunate twist of timing, the rights

to the novel were snapped up before publication by Brad Pitt and Jennifer Aniston just in time for their own story to meet an unforeseen end, and the project stalled long enough for 'The Girl in the Fireplace' to nick its concept and meet itself coming the other way. And then in 2007, with the kind of inevitability available only to hindsight, the veteran mortality-movie specialist Bruce Joel Rubin was finally let in to write the film over – having originally made his name in the early nineties with a burst of sometimes mawkish dead-people pictures beginning with *Ghost* and *Jacob's Ladder*. Particularly important in his CV for the *Wife* job is his 1993 directorial effort *My Life*, about a dying Michael Keaton's record of his life for the daughter he'll never know – a tale with both general and specific

affinities to Niffenegger's tissue-macerating theme of a life viewed as a whole.

The result is a magnificently manipulative blubfest with a deep understanding of the novel's power and embarrassments alike. Conscious of the massive early-teens fanclub, Rubin has retouched the story for the 12A audience, losing the novel's tiresome hot sex, alcoholism, and cookery as well as the Marxism, the amputated feet, and Henry's prematurely diminished attractiveness. None of these is particularly missed, and the novel's weaker second half has been fortified by a tightening of the narrative and emotional line around the figure of the second timeslipping character who emerges late in the tale. It's particularly to Rubin's credit that he's spun the novel's deplorable ending 180° around, and now has Henry pointedly ordering Clare *not* to do what she originally did in the final couple of pages. More problematic, though, are two significant compromises: the elimination of most of the scenes from Clare's childhood, and with them the coherence of the throughline of the first part of the novel in which her relationship with the adult Henry develops; and a postponement of the intimations of tragedy till the final act. Here Rubin has dispensed with the single most important moment in the novel, the



Similar problems attend Duncan Jones' well-received *Moon*, an attractively

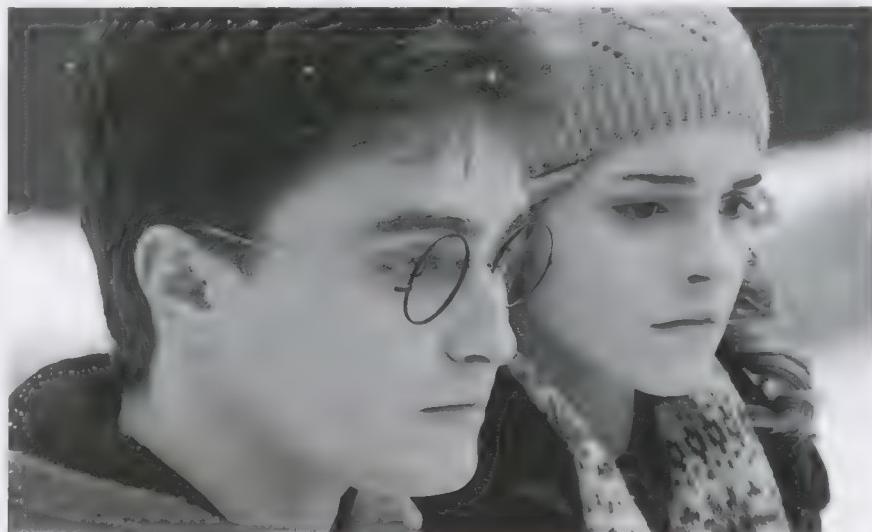
old-school space mystery rummaged together out of charity-shop remnants from *Solaris*, *Silent Running*, and especially *2001*, and boasting a brilliant setup phase followed by a slow decline into imbecility that unfortunately mirrors its hero's physical and mental disintegration. Sam Rockwell is, or seems to be, in the final weeks of a lonely three-year tour in a mining station on the far side of the moon, when a series of weird mental and bodily events culminates in the permanent materialisation of a doppelgänger. Which, if either, is real, and where has the other come from? Is either of them human, in whole or part? Is Sam hallucinating, virtual, dead? Is Kevin Spacey's HAL-like machine intelligence up to something, and if so what and why? What is really happening back on Earth, and does Earth, or anything, even exist? Which among the many pointed echoes of vintage sf films are clues, which are red herrings, and which

are something else again?

For a good half-hour, this is tremendous stuff – particularly the enigmatic edits in narrative continuity, some of which do indeed turn out to conceal momentous secrets that an attentive viewer has a sporting chance of clue-spotting. But the problem with keeping the audience guessing so long is that they're liable to guess something better than you actually have up your sleeve, particularly if they've read some actual science fiction rather than merely mashing up a handful of seventies films. To its credit, *Moon* has a more adventurous answer to its puzzle than the default *Ubik* scenario threatened, and with one thumping exception most of what we see on screen turns out to be part, if not exactly the whole, of reality. But it's at this point that Jones' own inexperience combines with a typically British underdeveloped script from the bish-bosh, two-drafts-and-a-polish

haunting early scene where a 13-year-old Clare witnesses her something "very, very bad" that casts its shadow over the next four hundred pages (only to be made rather a mess of at the novel's climax, which Rubin has tidied up as best he can but at the price of highlighting the clumsiness of the original plotting). The film also shares its characters' and the novel's, much-criticised indifference to conventional science-fictional kinds of question, such as the actual physics of time travel, what the world of the future looks like, and how society as a whole might respond to the problem of significant numbers of its citizens acquiring lottery-winning powers. As in the book, time travel is considered as a genetic rather than a mathematical problem, and as a private rather than a societal issue – unfortunate ammunition for the argument that, in trying to create a resistant form of sf to the testosterone-heavy genre tradition, it's embraced not just softer sciences and softer feelings but a softer form of logic. But then this is a film in which people's irony-free choice of wedding music is a waltz version 'Love Will Tear Us Apart'; and which invites you to choose between your faculty of reason and a fantasy of truer-than-true love embodied in the form of Eric Bana in the very buff buff. There's really no contest, and never was.

school to perpetrate a series of narrative blunders that sink a thitherto buoyant vehicle. Both Sam 2 and the Spacey machine are holed below the waterline by irrecoverable inconsistencies in behaviour and motivation, and out of the numerous gaping illogicalities in the plot three or four are showstoppers; while no explanation is ever offered for the very first in the chain of weirdnesses, nor is any retrievable within the film's own framework of reasoning. Jones has been perfectly forthcoming when questioned on the point that (i) the character seen in the *Solaris* moment is a version of the one Sam encounters remotely at a later point in the film, and that (ii) the mechanism involved is a psychic link – something that is not only never admitted to consideration anywhere in the film but is entirely detached from everything that actually is in it. Someone needs to tell these pop-aristocracy people that you simply can't do this. Ever.



The rest of the season's pack are family films of one kind or another, and **Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince** has been particularly energetic in making opportunities here for its longer-serving personnel. Among the stars spending unexpected time with their families in this film are Richard Griffiths, Fiona Shaw, Emma Thompson, Miranda Richardson, Imelda Staunton, and Clémence Poésy, as well as those like Ralph Fiennes and Jason Isaacs who effectively sit this volume out anyway. It's not good news for the locations, either: Privet Drive and the Dursleys have been ditched for a completely new and rather puzzling prologue set, for no clear reason, in a railway café, while the Weasleys' Burrow is prematurely torched in a new mid-film set piece that is going to have some interesting knock-on consequences for the scenes set there in the final book. Above all, even by the standards set by *Order of the Phoenix* the plotline cull has been spectacularly brutal, including almost the entire ending (both the big battle and the funeral have simply gone) and even the meaning of the title.

The startling thing is how little any of this turns out to matter. By the standards of all but the unsurpassed third film, *Prince* is completely up to scratch, with the finest production design in the series so far, a deft if tokenistic 3D opening, and some moments of great atmosphere and power (particularly in Dumbledore's Xavieresque home visit to young Voldy) that come closer to Asian horror than the sort of thing you'd expect to see in a *Potter* film. With every instalment this franchise seems more extraordinary as an experiment in

filmmaking: focussing all the energies of the local UK industry to build up the most active blockbuster franchise on the planet from scratch; growing a large and untried ensemble cast of children from primary age to professional maturity; and of course turning an increasingly strange adventure in genre literature into a coherent long-form cinematic cycle of unprecedented scale and ambition. And by this mature stage in the project, the Potter film team have become phenomenally adroit at turning lead into gold: at seeing what film can do to hone the flab of Rowling's later volumes into taut, toned cinematic muscle. Though JKR's *Prince* is by some way the most assured of the four fat Potters, it still suffers from the lumbering excesses of its neighbours; and it's hard not to admire the sheer virtuosity with which the film version has shorn away Rowling's interminable explanatorics. When the previous film deleted all the pensieve business, there was some curiosity about how this film (in which Dumbledore's collection of memories is the spine of the plot) was going to be able to build all that from scratch. The solution has a genius simplicity about it: the word pensieve is *never even spoken*, and Harry just plunges his face into a basin and there we are. Nothing to explain; it's film; you can just do that. Hundreds of pages can be saved once you recognise that the power to show means you never have to tell, and that nobody needs to have it explained what a bezoar is if they can just see it in action. For the first time, it's possible to imagine this team even salvaging the fiasco that is *Deathly Hallows*. They've certainly earned their chance.



**Michael Bay's Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen** initially disguises itself by squeezing down into the outward form of a summer blockbuster sequel, only to transform for the final hour into a giant alien behemoth beyond human understanding that stomps ferociously on our



**Off the back of Transformers, Hasbro's attempt to launch a second boys'-toys film franchise with Stephen Sommers' GI Joe: The Rise of Cobra** is if anything an even

puny terrestrial notion of cinema. Spielberg famously pitched the first film to its writers and director as being about "a boy and his car", and the sequel begins ingenuously enough by projecting the American myth of teenage masculinity to the next step in the adolescent hero's journey, where he has to exchange the family home for college and leave car and girlfriend behind. This first part of the film is strange enough in its own way, centring on a deeply weird middle-aged fantasy of what 13-year-old males imagine higher education to be like: a kind of hormonal health farm in which a leering Rainn Wilson delivers lubriciously metaphorised lectures to a front row of hot babes, while predatory sex robots in disguise put your monogamous principles to test. But by the time we've passed through the Smithsonian (again) and out into what appears to be a backdoor portal to Utah, the film discards pretty much all pretence to conventional film narrative, unfolding instead into a virtually scripted storyboarded spectacle – essentially *Black Hawk Down* with giant robots – in which

the characters do nothing but very slowly fight their way across a desert battleground to get the McGuffin where it needs to be to activate the Matrix of Leadership (a clonkingly-titled mythos element from deep canon). This being a 21st-century war film, it goes without saying that the war has to be a desert war, which here leads us on an epic trail of heritage-destruction porn from Petra to the pyramids. In almost every respect that conventionally matters – plotting, character, dialogue, sense, coherence of tone, compliance with the galactic interdiction on terrible comedy autobots who insult your manhood in annoying squeaky voices – it fails utterly, and indeed scarcely even tries. But it's also a mesmerising and at times positively exhilarating attempt to break through the undeniably primitive constraints of Hollywood blockbuster construction into an entirely new grammar of action cinema – like the transcendent glimpse we're afforded at the climax of an actual honest-to-Calvin robot heaven, before we're rudely hauled back to our own world.

madder production, opening in "France, 1641" with the line "James McCullen, you Scottish pig", and somehow managing to whisk us from there to a bewildering live-action *Team America* whose kick-ass showpiece sequence is a car-tossing chase through Paris in robot exosuits to prevent a weaponised Sienna Miller and an effete white-suited ninja from destroying the Eiffel Tower with a plague of green pixels. ("The French are pretty upset.") Like *Transformers*, it's a film about the generational replacement of toys by games, and how traditional toy brands need to reprogram themselves to restore the balance between teleologised and freeform play; and if *Transformers*' sandbox finale comes closer to the authentic feel of how nine-year-olds actually improvise combat, *Joe* beats it hands down in its creation of authentically minimal posable characters. The film is based on the Real American Hero mythos created by Marvel's Larry Hama for Hasbro in the early eighties to accompany its reboot of the toy franchise around sets of small-scale action-figure collectibles, in which GI Joe was no longer a character but a team: an international (title notwithstanding) elite commando squad with individual toy names and specialisms, each of whom is treated here

to an origin-story flashback any time there's a momentary pause in the action. The *Black Hawk Down* references are now overt – with a clip played onscreen, and the hero's own backstory (including a twist setup visible from space) itself centred on a mission gone wrong in "East Africa – Four Years Ago". Sommers' mission to extract this long-gestated project from its own particular development Mogadishu has been a fairly fraught one, with the film essentially written on set *Gladiator*-style for a production put together around a hasty shooting draft knocked out by another hand to beat the start of the writers' strike. But one of Sommers' strengths as a director of ludicrous action pictures has always been his immunity to any form of embarrassment; and he's also been a canny picker of elite international leading ladies, with Miller's breakout turn as the hero's ex-girlfriend nanorewired for evil an unexpectedly engaging successor to the starmaking parts Sommers has crafted in the past for Famke Janssen, Rachel Weisz, and Kate Beckinsale. It's not vintage Sommers like *Deep Rising* or the first *Mummy* – for one thing, he's not directing his own writing – but after five years living down *Van Helsing* it's good to have him so enthusiastically back in action.



As if these films weren't already sufficiently parodic of themselves, Michael Bay's old crime-partner Jerry Bruckheimer now joins forces with his *Pirates* writers Ted Elliott and Terry Rossio to bring us Disney's **G-Force**, about an elite team of guinea-pigs operating covertly within the FBI to bring down a global conspiracy to exterminate humanity by transforming domestic appliances into giant killer robots. The Eccleston role of sinister armaments tycoon here goes to Bill Nighy, who was also Scrimgeour in *Half-Blood Prince* before the cutting-room floor came up to meet him and everything went dark. If the premise doesn't have you tumbling round your wheel in hilarity, the film itself will do little to tickle you into it; the tone is deliberately deadpan, relying optimistically on the sheer silliness of the concept to

breathe life into boilerplate gadget-squad characterisation, dialogue, and plotting. But if your thing is 3D stunt chases in pimped hamster balls to 'O Fortuna' with fireworks, you know who to call.

**G-Force** has a lot of business about pets' need for "family", a theme echoed in the season's other major 3D fur-pic, the bizarrely-titled **Ice Age 3: Dawn of the Dinosaurs** – which dispatches its oddball mammalian pseudo-tribe through the ice into a lost world where the Jurassic still lumbers on oblivious, and the mammals' peaceable romantic and parental urges are threatened with premature extinction in a more primitive ecosystem that turns predators into prey at the bottom rather than the top of the food chain. It's not clear in what sense this constitutes the dawn of anything, and even my accompanying 11-year-old found the palaeontology a bit shaky ("Aren't those kind of dinosaurs herbivores?"); but it's by some way the most enjoyable of the *Ice Age* films, with some fine cartoon-animal puppetry and plenty of old-fashioned funny lines

("You're going to meet a nice girl with low standards, no real options, or sense of smell"), especially from the new character of Simon Pegg's surreally unhinged action weasel. ("Were you killed?" "Sadly, yes – but I lived!") Like its predecessors, it seeks to reassure a nervous family audience about evolution, extinction, and animals that eat other animals by presenting a reassuringly bloodless PG vision of nature in the raw, in which even the biggest and bloodiest predators have adorably cute babies ("You're just a great big softie"), and never eat meat unless it's in a form not directly identifiable as having ever been part of a recognisable living creature. No wonder they're all extinct.



Dinosaurs also roam randomly around **Land of the Lost**, a revamp for laughs of the seventies kids' TV series about a couple of youngsters and their dad cast into a parallel dimension of backlot detritus populated by rubber-suited lizard creatures and sculpted entirely out of silver-age TV sf narrative tropes. It's a strange and rather sad experience to watch this desperate travesty of a milestone series, on which UK viewers blank but which remains fondly remembered in the US, not least for the involvement of A-list of writers including Sturgeon, Niven, and Spinrad. Though the prolific series creators Sid and Mary Krofft remain attached, Brad Silberling's film is a coarse parody. The kids have gone, their names reassigned to completely new adult characters including Anna Friel as a hot Mancunian genius-babe who strips down to vest and shorts at the earliest opportunity; Will Ferrell's reconception of the hero is a calorie-abusing buffoon; and the elements that are retained are systematically ridiculed, with lashings of gross-out poo jokes and gay-bashing for the little boys and tiresome actor-on-actor comedy bonding for nobody's amusement but the performers'.

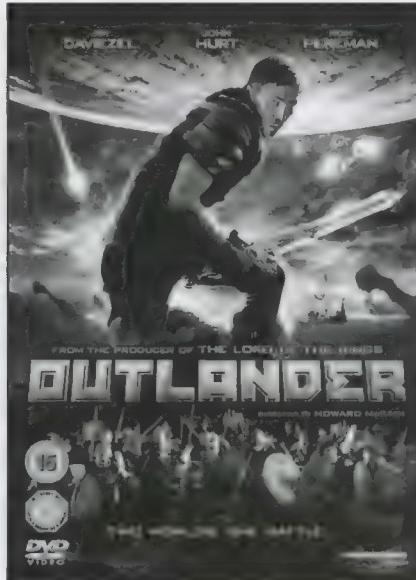


Still, it's not quite as grim as **Aliens in the Attic**, which the clapperboards in the end-title outtakes reveal to have been shot under the title *They Came from Upstairs*, and which has the most inept alien invasion in galactic history held at bay in a dusty loft by a bunch of kids whose mission is to stop them getting down the ladder and into the basement, while their parents manage to remain oblivious in the next room as crashing stunt battles are fought in their own hallway. "Contains misuse of fireworks", explains the UK certification gloss, but in truth it contains misuse of pretty much everything, from *ET* (the ransacking of which goes way beyond mere homage) to Ashley Tisdale (as the big sister who learns the wisdom of surrender to the world-knowledge of emotionally clueless younger males) to the audience's basic intelligence (*passim*). And why is there an alien McGuffin in the basement? "It was sent here years ago. Some idiot built this place right on top of it." I daresay there are a lot of people here in the present who'd like to go back with an elite squad of time commandos and give that idiot a hug.

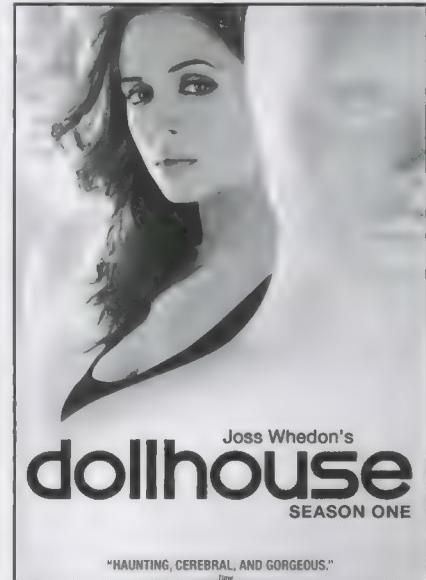
## Laser Fodder Tony Lee



Further to my #218 column's introduction to Wright and Cooper's entirely derivative space opera **Stargate Atlantis**, here's the fifth and final season (DVD, 10 August), with more tiredly self-reflexive shenanigans for intergalactic travellers lacking chatty guidebooks – to ease their anxieties about close encounters of a bodily-invasive kind, refugee visitors, daring rescues, accidental time-travelling, parallel worlds/universes odysseys, and cosmic abyss monitoring duties. Step through the vortex, from lonely planet Earth into the exciting unknowns of Pegasus galaxy, where SG corps mimic the antics of numerous genre outings including but not only *DS9*, *B5*, *CE3K*, *X-Files* and *Sliders*, plus (as usual) old favourites Flash Gordon and Buck Rogers. After recap, the programme's restart button deals with ordeals (crew buried alive), nightmares (Teyla gives birth during a space battle), and other problems caused by archenemy Michael, but a leadership change is due in the flying city. Carter's out, Woolsey's in... Is Robert Picardo's left-brained ex-lawyer a better commander for Atlantis? Yes, surprisingly, though obviously more a Picard than a Kirk. Normal service resumes with mysteries, crises, hassles and the usual complement of groan-inducing in-jokes. Freed from a bout of mind control, Chewie (sorry, Ronon) has 'cold turkey' withdrawal from drug slavery. *Daedalus Variations* has a 'Mary Celeste' starship tricked out with 'alternate reality' drive for dimension-hopping, which threatens either one star system's future or puts all spacetime at risk. Troubles with identity

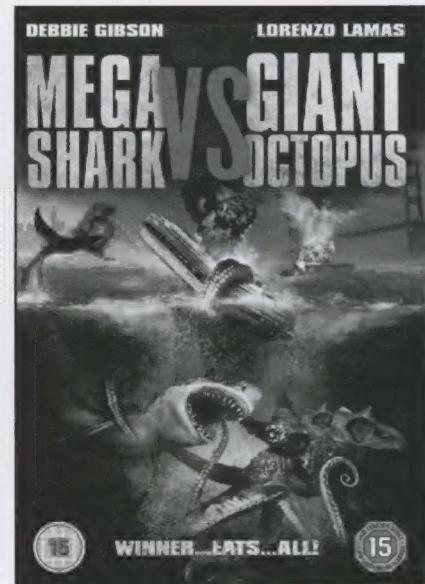
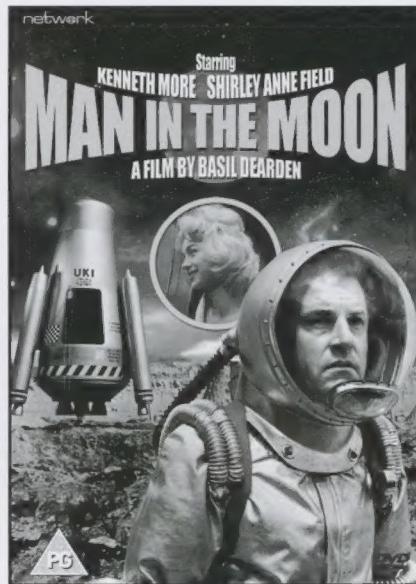
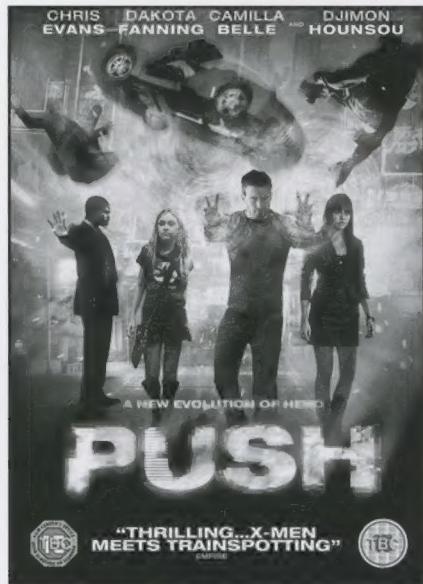


and rationality ensue when genius McKay loses his memory (fixed by neurosurgery in a damp cave), and Teyla opts into an undercover masquerade as a hive queen to negotiate with the Wraith. Dr Jackson returns in best episode *First Contact*, to locate a secret lab hidden in Atlantis. Quality and pace sags with backstory info-dump from Asgard clones in *The Lost Tribe*, when arrogant 'little grey men' deliver exposition turgid enough to be funny. The analogies of wartime resistance (complete with betrayal of natives by 'Nazi' sympathisers), and the *Inquisition* tribunal (a pompous clip show, like time-wasters from 1980s' telly!) derail vague interest with some unambitious writing. *The Prodigal* has super-baddie Michael occupy Atlantis; siege ensues (that comment is longer than reticent Ronon's mission report). Dealing with more Spielbergian aliens, promoting weird phildickian hallucinations, Atlantis crew R&R on Earth sees yet another cosmic menace nixed by McKay and Keller whose romantic interlude is mangled by demo of solution to global warming that feels like a plot salvaged from 1940s' *Astounding SF*. Another sideways Earth story, *Vegas*, posits novelty 'other' Sheppard as a dishevelled Mulder, tracking an alien serial-killer. Extended finale, *Enemy At The Gate*, is badly performed story surgery, tying off haemorrhaging arteries of truth or consequences, when the Wraith supership targets Area 51, prompting Atlantis' return home, apparently in triumph. However, that's not the end. Franchise spin-offs continue with a TV movie, *Stargate*



*Extinction*, and forthcoming series *Stargate Universe*. If cheesy SyFy channel guff is your thing, this kitschy attempt to entertain fans with 'old fashioned' adventuring fits the bill nicely.

**Alien spacecraft crashes in Norway...**  
Lone survivor of shipwreck 'phones home' from Iron Age world. Lingo download from database to brain makes stranger gasp, scream and puke with nosebleed. Schooling's no better where he's from, eh? **Outlander** (DVD/BD, 17 August) by Howard McCain deftly blends influence of *Aliens* and *Predator* franchises with Norse mythology, suggesting that Grendel was an extraterrestrial creature, taken for a dragon by Odin-fearing superstitious natives. Adaptive spacer Kainan (James Caviezel, *Highwaymen*, *Frequency*, and Mel Gibson's idea of Jesus) is captured by villagers yet freed by King Rothgar (John Hurt), to help save Herot lands from this half-visible terror. Feisty heroine Freya (Sophia Myles, *Dracula*, *Thunderbirds*) fancies the outsider. Wulfric (Jack Hudson, *Shrooms*) is wary of usurper to throne, but gets chummy with newcomer after shield hall's macho fun and games establish Viking hierarchy. Much discussed neighbouring warlord Gunnar (Ron Perlman, a favourite genre hero since *Hellboy*) makes the most from his extended cameo. With its bioluminescence and startling appearances, the monstrous moorwen (designed by Patrick Tatopoulos, *Silent Hill*, *The Cave*, *Underworld* and *I, Robot*) prove to be genuinely uncanny and impressive creatures like 'demons' that glow



in the dark. No wonder the local Christian priest believes this beast is Lucifer. Much claustrophobic suspense ensues when Norse warriors follow their enemy into its underground lair, where Freya confronts the animal's offspring while trapped in the moorwen 'larder'. With its 'foreigner' saviour becoming accepted by a besieged tribe, this is certainly a lot better than similar fare like Marcus Nispel's dismal, non-SF *Pathfinder* (2007), and highly effective as a cross-genre retelling of heroic legend. Quite surprisingly, it's better quality entertainment, overall, than any of the recent Beowulf movies. In spite of the predictable storyline (what else could we expect, considering its source?), the stars' roles are winningly underplayed, and McCain's smart direction maintains a firm hand on narrative pace, building of tension before gritty battles, and fascinating medley of dragon-slayer allusions. *Outlander* is a fantastic big-screen genre-action debut from a filmmaker to watch out for.

**Goku** (Justin Chatwin, *The Invisible*) is like 'karate kid' with air-bending chi powers in **Dragonball Evolution** (DVD/BD, 31 August), a live-action version of a popular manga/anime series. Teen superhero wannabe Goku knows kung fu – as Bruce Lee described it, "the art of fighting without fighting," avoiding full contact confrontations with the school bully's gang, and impressing new girl Chi Chi (Jamie Chung, *Samurai Girl TV*) with such combative restraint, if not with droll chat-up lines. Now, tragedy strikes, as

green-skinned alien Lord Piccolo (James Marsters, Spike in *Buffy, Angel*; Brainiac in *Smallville*) escapes from 2,000 years imprisonment and threatens the planet. Team-ups for Goku's inevitable save-the-world quest include young scientist Bulma (Emmy Rossum, Joel Schumacher's *Phantom Of The Opera*), a heroine in 'Lara Croft' mode, and campy Master Roshi (the great Chow Yun-fat). Goku fails to protect his grandpa from lethal villains, but eventually learns he has a much closer link to baddie Piccolo than just being a guardian of one of the seven magical 'dragonballs' required to defeat evil. It's a shamelessly derivative flick, with CGI'd gadgets and over-ambitious teens, nursery-rhyme clues to prevent apocalypse, and widescreen sorcery climax deploying colourful visual effects. Ernie Hudson (*Ghostbusters, Congo, Oz*) has a helpful guru cameo as Sifu Norris, Eriko Tamura (*Heroes, Reaper*) does well as sneaky ninja babe Mai. Director James Wong made supernatural chiller *Final Destination*, and Jet Lee vehicle, sci-fi actioner *The One*. Here, though, the filmmaker evinces a lighter touch, blending eastern mysticism (often streamed through Hollywood filters into objective nonsense), with readily iconic oriental characters blithely pigeonholed into familiar Americanised comicbook forms, and basic videogame style plotting with a noticeably regressive playing-to-the-gallery affect. We have seen this kind of subgenre cinema before in *Bulletproof Monk* (2003), which also featured Mr Chow, and such culture-clash adventures rarely work. *DBE* offers

average time-wasting entertainment that's perhaps worth renting if you are generally curious about live-action 'manga' movies.

**Stepford Wives meets Joe 90?** Created by genre TV maven Joss Whedon, **Dollhouse** (DVD, 7 September) is the new vehicle for Eliza Dushku – who unfortunately failed to secure a long run for previous series *Tru Calling*. Here, she volunteers for mind wipe, and gets rewritable memory implants with a specific persona and skills (mercenary, dream date, whatever), as requested by wealthy clients of the rent-a-person urban myth agency. Placing yet another *Nikita*-inspired heroine in a *Westworld* or *Fantasy Island* premise hardly promises quality TV. The second episode's rehash, with minor twists, of *The Most Dangerous Game* did not bode well for the show's future, and yet it rallies from that faltering start, eventually providing a superb combo of fascinating portrayals, chilling intrigues, and good-natured fun, and it matters not that blank slate 'Echo' is basically just a hireling sketched into vice, espionage or altruistic plots. Under producer Dushku's influence, varied stories downplay a potential for glamour or titillation, defaulting to TV action-girl mode, recalling the star's *Buffy* role (as bad slayer Faith), and owing significant debts to J.J. Abrams' hit, *Alias* (2001–6). Despite vanilla blandness of half the supporting cast – brains-wrangler genius Topher (Fran Kranz) is dorky techie stereotype, Echo's moralist handler Boyd (Harry Lennix) is so dull as the ex-cop everyman, obsessed

federal agent Ballard (Tahmoh Penikett) has all the charisma of magnolia emulsion, and even victimised Sierra (Dichen Lachman) fails to attract much sympathy – the “very British” Dollhouse manager, Adelle (Olivia Williams, *Sixth Sense*, Hera in *Jason And The Argonauts* remake, Dr MacTaggart in *X-Men: The Last Stand*), is fine, Reed Diamond’s callous security chief is agreeably hateable, Amy Acker wears Dr Saunders’ facial scars convincingly, and the talented Dushku shifts from docile to feral, adorable to psychotic, finding plenty of soft spots and rough edges in her diverse role-playing gigs as surrogate this, expert that, and perfect other. Under-floor sleeping cells, arranged in floral pattern (that recalls the cryogenic pods of *Alien*), is a symbolically disquieting image resembling coffins that suggests ‘zombification’.

When dolls ask whether they slept during proxy ‘treatment’, it’s a subtle reminder of ubiquitous instructions to ‘sleep’ in John Carpenter’s alien-invasion satire *They Live*, and similarly insidious plans for conquest lurk within the backstory of this TV series. Here, ‘they’ know all about your ‘secret’ dreams, waking or subconscious. As the programmed heroine Echo works through suffocating layers of deception, she confronts a NSA ‘mole’ spook, faces ersatz life after death, survives kidnapping by Dollhouse’s prodigal psycho Alpha (head crowded with 48 implants), and the catch-and-release formula of post-hypnotic suggestions, but she discovers that infamy and celebrity are still more fake and manufactured than any of the ‘dolls’. With degrees of scathing wit and charming sycophantism, the show queries the value of identity and meaning of personality in a deranged tomorrow’s world of unchecked globalisation, a loss of privacy to sin, a re-branding of honesty as transgression, and familiarity with the ostensibly pointless struggles of unyielding individuality within a persuasive dystopian scene, where freewill is criminal and only sellable decadence is virtuous. At times, not unlike the ‘sleeve’ slavery in Richard Morgan’s *Altered Carbon* milieu, though without the hardboiled sleaze of those novels, *Dollhouse* is impressive drama about ‘human trafficking’, made with rigorous intelligence and corresponding imagination. The first season boxset includes unaired pilot, *Echo* (perhaps burdened with its torrent of details?), which had its footage recycled into several episodes, plus *Terminator*-styled post-holocaust nightmare, *Epitaph One*, set in

Los Angeles 2019.

**Push** (DVD/BD, 29 June) from Paul McGuigan – maker of *The Reckoning* and *Lucky Number Slevin* – is plain-clothes superheroes action following the imprints of *Scanners*, *Firestarter* and *Heroes*, with a nod towards *X-Men* derivative *Mutant X*. References to sci-fi TV are telling because, despite its needlessly convoluted plotting, *Push* seems for all the world like a pilot for a series. Precognitive warnings, decades ahead of time, prompt telekinetic hero Nick (Chris Evans, *Fantastic Four*, *Sunshine*) to join precocious teen seer Cassie (Dakota Fanning, *War Of The Worlds* remake) on a quest for mind-controller Kira (Camilla Belle, *10,000 BC*, *When A Stranger Calls* remake), who knows where the vital “psychic steroid” MacGuffin is. Through a maze of teeming streets, haunted slums, bustling markets and polluted docks, Hong Kong locations become a colourful or shadowy background character, where ‘mastermind’ Carver (Djimon Hounsou, *Blood Diamond*) and psi-effective henchman Victor (Neil Jackson, *Blade* TV series) orchestrate sufficient confusions to frustrate wicked plans of local gangs and coerce anxious heroes into submission. Too much handheld jitter-cam undermines action sequences but there’s clever stuff here with force-fields and floating remote-controlled guns even before a creatively staged double-blind finale.

**Made in 1960 (before Gagarin, after chimps)**, Basil Dearden’s astronaut comedy **Man In The Moon** (DVD, 20 July) helps celebrate, with its own brand of quiet charm, the 40th anniversary of Apollo 11. Kenneth More is carefree William Blood, whose perfect health is a “subversive influence” to baffled boffins in medical research, but who finds his calling when total immunity to illness makes him the ideal ‘pathfinder’ for a secret British jaunt. Super-fit spacer trainee Leo (Charles Gray) is envious of civilian Blood’s pioneering flight schedule, but our unsuspecting hero survives a sabotaged centrifuge and rocket sledge. It’s the prospect of marriage to flighty stripper Polly (Shirley Anne Field, *These Are The Damned*) that makes Blood vulnerable before the rocket launch from Woomera. A twist ending records humiliating failure for our space programme, but anyone familiar with conventions of quaint British farce can guess what happens.

**Zack Snyder’s three-hour-plus**

**Watchmen Director’s Cut** (region-free Blu-ray import, 27 July), boasts 24 minutes of extra footage, mostly scattered oddments of character-shading with no additional scenes impacting on the main story overall. There can be no doubt the opening titles’ montage is one of the most impressive such sequences in recent cinema but, perhaps unfortunately, it remains a highlight of the whole picture. Although enigmas Rorschach and Dr Manhattan might seem to be figures of primary interest, it is anti-hero The Comedian (killer of presidents and pregnant women) who is the pivotal character. Supposedly this alternative-history’s deeply-twisted flipside answer to Marvel’s über-patriot super-soldier Captain America, homicidal brute the Comedian makes crazy depressives like Rorschach seem tame, as far as ‘inspirational’ champions go. A comicbook adaptation that’s simply too faithful to its graphic novel source, locked into narrative and subtexts which might have benefited from updating beyond contexts of the mid-1980s’ geopolitics and cultural zeitgeist to 21st century’s concerns, *Watchmen* has arrived too late to be viewed as important a work as *Hulk* or *Dark Knight*. I watched it four times, but still cannot decide whether it’s a truly great filmic version of Moore’s influential ‘satirical deconstruction’, or just a very good one.

**Sometimes you just have to laugh...**

**Mega Shark vs. Giant Octopus** (DVD, 7 August) is a bog-standard ‘monster movie’ wearing its effortlessly marketable heartlessness on its box sleeve. Produced by Asylum, makers of rip-offs *Transmorphers: Fall Of Man* and *Terminators*, this aims for so-bad-it’s-good status but its home-video budget leaves stars Deborah Gibson (remember Debbie?), in her genre feature debut, and washed-up action hero Lorenzo Lamas (sans ponytail) both filling in, with atrocious dialogue, for inadequate visuals (CGI for beer money). Prehistoric megalodon sinks battleships, high-jumps and eats airliner (hilarious!), swims at 500 knots, visits San Francisco to snack on Golden Gate Bridge. Octopus reaches to swat jet fighter, scatters wolf-pack submarines like skittles, favours Tokyo but follows pheromone lure to wrestle sharkie and save mankind. Simply never as much fun as Toho’s average *Godzilla* sequels, this absurd half-intentional schlock is best avoided unless your party is stoned or drunk.



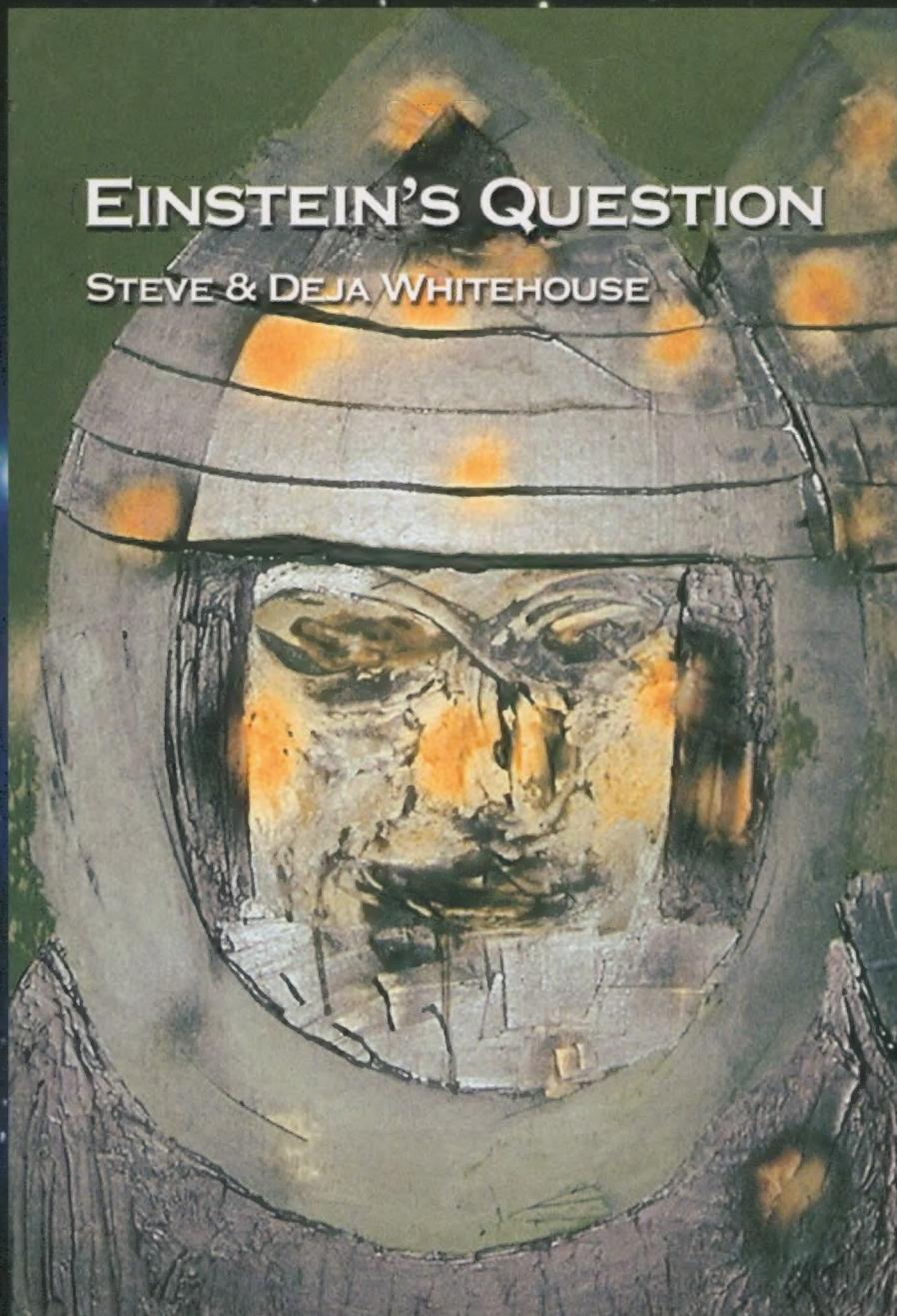
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